20¢ MAR. 15, 1926 TWICE A MONTH

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Beginning
"SINISTER HOUSE"
by CHARLES G. BOOTH

DAVID BELASCO
THE WIZARD OF THE DRAMA
tells of "THE MOST MYSTERIOUS
HAPPENING IN MY LIFE"

How a *Faux Pas* Made Me Popular

I never knew it was so easy to be popular until a humiliating experience showed me the secret

THE day I met Grace we went swimming. There was another chap along — Harry something — a dapper, grinning fellow with his hair slicked back. He was awkward in the water and his bathing suit hung about him like a wet sack. I didn't see how Grace could stand him.

My Fatal Mistake

That night at the hotel dance I learned a lesson. The first couple that caught my eye was Grace and Harry—but what a different Harry! His slick hair and dapper manner seemed to fit the picture perfectly. And how easily—how faultlessly he danced!

"Aren't you going to ask me to dance?" Grace called gaily to me.

I flushed, realizing I couldn't dance a step. "Why, I—I'd love to, but——"

"All right," Grace broke in, "the next dance is yours."

Before I could speak the orchestra started to play—a dreamy oriental tune. Grace stood waiting. I could feel Harry's smirking eyes on me. I made a wild stab. "I'm sorry—but I can't tango."

"That's a waltz!" Grace laughed.

"I don't waltz either," I faltered, realizing I had made a faux pas—a blunder.

"I don't think you want to dance with me at all," she flashed. Before I could explain further, she and Harry had glided away. I stumbled out of the ball room. Grace's last words—"I'll never speak to you again!" were ringing in my ears.

Why I Never Made Friends

That night I was mighty blue. Why couldn't I make a hit with the girls like the other fellows did? Girls liked me at first but later they went off with fellows who took them dancing. That was my weak point—I could never be popular unless I learned to dance. I had heard of a new way to learn—at home, without music or teacher. Arthur Murray, America's foremost dancing instructor, had perfected this method. I sent for his free booklet and test lesson.

The booklet came promptly and I read it through without stopping. Here was just what I needed. I tried the test lesson and was amazed at the ease with which I was able to master the steps. The lessons were so clear, so simple. I grew confident—eager to dance to music and a real partner.

An Exciting Night

I continued learning so I could attend the coming mask ball at the hotel.

What an exciting night that was! I danced with many partners, keeping perfect time, gliding around the floor like a professional! Midnight found me dancing with a charming creature in a soft, clinging costume.

"Where did you learn to dance so divinely?" she murmured. She was masked but her voice thrilled me strangely. Later I told her the whole story—How I met a beautiful girl and lost her in a day—how wretched I felt—how I learned to dance in my own room.

She caught my hand. "Oh, I'm sorry——" Her voice broke—the voice that thrilled me so strangely. I brushed aside her mask. Imagine my wonder—surprise—joy! It was Grace who was smiling up at me!

What wonderful times we had together after that. We went everywhere—parties, balls and dances. No longer was I a gloomy wallflower, envying others. I was throbbing with new life, new popularity, acclaimed as a faultless dancer wherever I went. The day I wrote to Arthur Murray was certainly the luckiest in my life.

This story is typical. Thousands have learned to dance quickly and easily through Arthur Murray's course. And so can you.

Free! 32 Page Booklet and Test Lesson

Read Mr. Murray's 32 page illustrated booklet and try the Free Test Lesson which proves how easy it is to learn. The book tells how Mr. Murray became private instructor to the "400," how he taught over 250,000 people to dance by mail, and how he can teach **you to** become a graceful, popular dancer in a few enjoyable evenings. And you'll enjoy the Test Lesson because it shows how quickly you can become a good dancer. Mail the coupon at once. Enclose only 25c to cover postage and mailing. Arthur Murray, Studio 593, 3 E. 43rd St., New York City.

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Without obligating me in any way, please send me your Free Test Lesson and your beautifully illustrated 32-page book which tells all about Arthur Murray's course in dancing and explains how it can make me a graceful dancer, right in my own home, without music, partner or private teacher. I enclose 25c to cover postage and mailing.

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ROBERT SIMPSON, EDITOR

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Around the Corner

IF we did not believe that there was always better luck around the corner, an altogether too generous percentage of the problems we are called upon to face would become intolerable. And with this thought always in mind, MYSTERY MAGAZINE turns each successive corner, extremely careful to see to it that each successive number actually does live up to the increasing expectations of its readers.

Our April 1 issue is an excellent example of this. For, in this number—

Agatha Christie provides a splendid mystery novelette entitled "The Under Dog."

Ethel Barrymore tells a compelling story of "The Most Mysterious Happening In My Life."

Dale Collins admirably continues the *Peter Lamb* series revealing how *Peter* becomes the victim of "A Slight Misapprehension."

William Merriam Rouse presents French Canada in a delightful humor, and the title of this fantasy could not very well be any other than "À Bon Marché."

Richard Howells Watkins asks us to consider a problem of intense and unusual interest in a story that is briefly and pointedly entitled "Who?"

And Charles G. Booth's novel, "Sinister House," becomes even more mysterious in the second installment than in the first.

Incidentally, MYSTERY MAGAZINE turns a new corner twice a month. Dressed in its distinctly different cover designs, it appears on the newstands every first and fifteenth.

The Spark of Life

By GEORGE C. HENDERSON

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE

CHAPTER I

THE FAR LIGHT

A BLACK cat squatted on the cold stone floor and watched a hulking stooped figure in striped clothing saw on the chilled steel bars of a cell door. The tool with which the man was cutting his way to freedom was a small needle embedded in a chunk of hard wood. Little by little, it picked a hole in the metal bar under the steady, careful, relentless pressure of the felon's strong fingers.

"Lucky" Jim Rand was living up to his reputation. Even on the eve of his execution he was making a fight for his life.

At intervals "Lucky" halted his sawing, slid noiselessly erect and peered out through the bars, listening intently. He looked in all directions except one, and even there he sensed the tall ghostly outlines of that hated place.

There in a dismal, deserted room on the top floor of the old brick building stood the *thing*, a scaffold with thirteen steps and a trap-door. At the thought of it now he gritted his teeth with a slight shudder and resolutely fixed his eyes on the garden below him, where visitors, officials and prisoners passed in review along the graveled walks between rows of fragrant rainbow-tinted flowers.

Dank wisps of fog, curling in over the concrete walls, enveloped the guards on the parapets, softened the garish outlines of prison buildings and, sifting in through the bars, touched Lucky's cheek with cold fingers, fingers that reached into his very heart and crushed it with a slow, persistent pressure. It was the very essence of death, this fog, bringing with it a strange enemy before which even he quailed in despair.

Suddenly he dropped the tool into the neck of his open shirt and smoothed over the raw cut in the bar with a bit of dirt paste, made from dust accumulated in his cell. Then with accelerated movements he slipped the kitten under the blanket of his iron cot and dropped beside it, figure drooping, head hanging low.

A shadow fell on the door. Noiselessly a guard appeared and waited, watching, until he was joined by two others. Warden's orders specified that "Lucky" Rand must always be accompanied by three guards wherever he went. Lem Jukes, a turnkey who had entered Lucky's cell alone, was still in the hospital.

A key rasped in the lock.

"Come on, Rand," commanded the first guard. "You're wanted in the Captain's office."

Rand rose creakingly from his narrow cot and stood obediently, patiently, with head slightly inclined, arms hanging loosely by his sides in that deadly deceptive attitude that had wrecked the career of

more than one gangster in the famous Third ward.

"Now, don't try to pull off nothin'," warned the guard sharply. "You got a visitor."

Lucky Jim made no reply, nor did he resist when they fastened a heavy iron weight to his right leg, an Oregon boot. With sham docility he shuffled down the iron stairs and along the graveled walk to the low, ivy-hung porch, where the captain had his office. An officer, sitting on a chair tilted back against the wall, brought it down on the board floor with a whack and arose to scrutinize him at closer range.

Two sleek-haired trusties emerged from the identification bureau and stood whispering like privileged characters as they stared after him. High up on the penitentiary wall a khaki-clad man emerged from a little tower, grounded his rifle and peered down at the group through the mist.

"That would be Lucky Rand," he muttered. "Well, his luck won't do him any good after tomorrow."

As Jim entered the captain's office a girl jumped up quickly from a chair near the officer's desk and ran toward him. Without a word she threw herself into his arms and clung there.

For an instant he made no move, then his hands stole up over her shoulders and he held her tight.

"Douse the weeps," he growled roughly. "I'm not croaked yet."

WITHOUT so much as a glance at the officers about them, he picked her up in his arms, carried her to a chair in a corner and kneeled beside her.

"Now, come on, Babe," he urged. "Switch off the waterworks and slip me the info. What's his nibs say?"

Babe McMahon twisted her shoulders with a nervous, hopeless movement, dabbed at her eyes with a pink-embroidered handkerchief and straightened up as if stimulated by the cool confidence of his tone. Her rather plain face, lighted now with an exalted emotion, seemed almost beautiful, despite the disfigurement of rouge, trimmed eyebrows and black beauty spot.

Even the captain by his attitude indicated that he felt this artificial creature was not just an ordinary dance-hall girl. Her broad, high forehead, well-spaced gray eyes, rather large generous mouth and medium heavy features united with a lithe muscled body to complete a picture of a strong-passioned, stern-willed woman, with undoubted charm and magnetism. Personality, not beauty, had won her a place in the confidence of Lucky Jim Rand, if not in his heart. No one could tell when Lucky's heart was affected. In fact many believed that organ to be non-existent.

"He's deaf, blind and dumb," she asserted emphatically, though in her habitual low resonant voice. "Dumb! Say, he'd let Little Eva starve to death on the ice while he talked it over with the attorney general. We got as much chance reachin' him as I have kissin' myself on the back of the neck. The old boy wouldn't see me and he hasn't answered any of Attorney Beard's telegrams."

"What's Waverly doing?"

Lucky Jim had *made* Waverly with the support of his Third ward clique and surely the senator would not desert him now.

Babe's eyes flashed. Memory of a private meeting with the senator in his office brought a curl to her lips.

"He's a weakling," she replied contemptuously. "I warned you agin him."

Rand interrupted her with a quick lift of his head.

"Anyway Tannerly can't quit

now," he asserted confidently. "There's millions at stake and he ought to know he can't swing the regulars without me. I forced that municipal water scheme down their throats and you know what Tan promised me, 200,000 cold berries."

Babe leaned down impulsively and caught her long, muscled fingers in his mop of straight black hair.

"Do you know what I think of Tannerly?" she whispered. "Do you know why he's stalled us with the promise that the governor would give you a last-minute pardon?"

Rand raised his head and stared at the earnest, agitated face. His black eyes clashed with the gray ones, but they did not flinch before his challenging scrutiny.

"You think Tannerly means to save $200,000," he said slowly.

"And so do you," she replied, a bit defiantly. "Listen to me, Lucky——"

Rand rose with a quick, angry movement.

"Damn it, don't you call me that!" he barked. "Lucky? I've never been lucky and you know it. The word mocks me. You know why I've won. Fight, not luck. Luck never got nobody nothing. I licked a guy for my first job. They called me lucky. I nearly killed Mike Moran to hold my leadership. Luck, they said. Call me anything but that Lucky. What's gonna save me from the rope, luck? Hell no, fight!

"Lissen here. If Tannerly quits on me, he's through. I'll get him sure. If Waverly don't work, it's the stix for him. I'm sending word by you, now. Tell 'em and if they don't act, tip off the gang. *Them's my orders.*"

Babe listened with mingled fear and astonishment; an unreasoning fear bred of long subservience to this man, astonishment at his egotism in thinking that his power remained unbroken; that he, a helpless condemned felon could still sway the political life of a great city as he had done when free. Again he was kneeling beside her waiting.

"Your orders, Jim," she murmured. "Yes, you can still give orders——"

"And enforce them," he interrupted her shortly. "Tell the gang I'm gonna get free, with or without them. And if it's without them, by God, they'll have cause to remember it!"

Babe caught inspiration from his confidence. With a little moan she clasped his head to her breast and bent down to kiss the smooth, dark brow again and again. Here was fighting spirit that rose above and transcended iron bars and stone walls.

"Oh, Jim, Jim!" she cried. "You'll win. I know you'll win. I'll tell them just like you told me. I'll put it across. I'll even go to Marve Ashford." She paused for an instant at thought of the repulsive, disease-ridden bail bond broker, and then rushed on impulsively. "Yes, Jim, I'll even do that. Marve will go to bat on this if I ask him—right."

SHE hesitated and looked up at him, expecting some protest at her offer of sacrifice. But he showed no sign of emotion. His dark eyes were turned inward, seeing nothing, and his thin lips were closed tightly, transforming his countenance into a wax mask.

"Good," he said incisively, without turning his head.

"Five minutes more, Rand," said the captain casually, looking up from his desk. "Finish up your affairs in five minutes. You'll see no more visitors today."

Lucky Jim became all business.

"Here's the dope on them birds, Babe," he said. "Buried in the ground right close to the north side

of the old elm tree back of my dump is a tin-box. There's the stuff that'll break Waverly. As for Tannerly, you know the deal. I swung the regular crowd for the thirty million dollars water bond issue with the secret understanding that after the project was all finished with the people's jack, I'd turn it over to Tan's power trust at a purely nominal rent. Tannerly gets the water and power for less than cost to sell back to the people, who own it, at a big profit. Get me?

"Now, you tell Tannerly that if he don't free me by ten o'clock tomorrow, I'll break loose myself *and the people of this city will operate their own water and power plant.* I'd be out of here now if I hadn't depended on his promise of a pardon. If I die, that means Tannerly croaked me. But I won't hang. Understand?"

Babe nodded eagerly.

"You're the old hundred-per-cent thunderbolt," she assented admiringly. "I'll put it over. They might as well cancel invites to this necktie party right now."

Rand studied her evenly for several seconds before continuing.

"There'll be no winding up my affairs," he asserted. "I've got twenty-one thousand dollars in greenbacks soaked away. Tannerly came through with plenty of fall money for the trial, I'll say that for him. I didn't have to touch my own wad. If I don't get out, that twenty-one thousand stays there and rots. If you put this over, I'll split with you."

Babe came to her feet without a word. Her face was suddenly white and as she looked up at Rand her lips drooped pitifully.

"I never thought you'd say such a thing to me, Jim," she said, in a choking voice. "How could you? How could you, when I love you so? Oh, Jim, you are hard; hard and cold as granite. You don't love me or you'd never 've said that."

A bewildered expression crossed Lucky's face and for an instant his hands fluttered helplessly before they closed around the girl's form. Jolly, devil-may-care slangy little Babe had never wept before, ven when he had been curt and cross. And she had never objected to taking a few dollars from him now and then. What had got into her?

As he stooped to kiss her, warm strong arms encircled his neck and clung there. Turbulent, half-smothered words of love broke from her lips and in the contagion he, too, said things that he had never said before, tender senseless mouthings voiced from unplumbed depths. Finally, when the guards led him off, his head was thrown back and there was a far-away look in his eyes, as if he had suddenly seen a light shining from afar.

CHAPTER II

DARKNESS

BACK in his cell Lucky Jim set to work again on the steel bar. He was too close to the drab realities of death to sit and moon.

A bell clamored, wafted up to him came an uneasy rustling, followed by the noise of tramping feet. It was the first lockup, four o'clock. Soon th prison band would strike up if——

The thought generated an impulse so powerful that he sat back on the stone floor and remained there, benumbed. This was Thursday evening and if the band did not play, *that was a sign some man must die on the morrow.* Only at the request of the doomed man himself would the prison band play on the evening

before an execution, and he had made no such request.

Music would mean a reprieve, pardon, postponement. Forgetful that he was wasting precious minutes that should be devoted to cutting the last bar, he held there on the floor, his whole being given up to one function, listening. Illusory melodies filled his mind and stimulated his hearing until his ears pained him. In his imagination he heard the wail of a saxophone, now the blare of a slide trombone and again the rattle of drums.

The tramping on the pavement grew louder as the convicts entered their cells. Presently it ceased to be followed by calls of the guards checking up on each tier of cells, the clanking of steel on steel as the great locks and bars were shot into place and then the quick passage of the captain as he inspected each room.

Silence followed, a silence impregnated with an intangible menacing quality. He knew the reason for the tenseness of it. The ears of three thousand prisoners were straining to hear the first sound from the bandroom, even as he. Below him in the tanks of the old cell building and far off across the yards in the new steel single cells sullen men were staring moodily at one another while thoughts of rebellion boiled and simmered in their minds. Executions always had this effect on other prisoners. It left them depressed for days after.

Minutes passed. He gripped the bars until his fingers ached, and dragged himself erect as noiselessly as possible, so that he might catch the very first note. A sound behind him caused him to whirl with a snarling intake of breath. The cat had jumped from the bed down onto the floor and stood there arching its back and purring.

The movement restored his reason. Resolutely he dropped to his knees and began working on the bar again, this time feverishly.

"T'hell with the band," he muttered. "That stuff will get my goat. I've got to fight my own way." Hope welled up in him as he wielded the delicate instrument. Only an eighth of an inch of hard graty steel lay between him and freedom of the grounds. Three bars he had already severed by the use of many needles and hours of persistent toil. They were hanging now by mere threads with the breaks in them concealed by putty made of dust. When this, the fourth, gave way, it would leave a hole, barely big enough to admit his body. He could then reach the balcony, drop down to the pavement in the gloom and there take his chance with the rifles of the guards on the wall. Better die from a bullet than by the noose!

For minutes that seemed like hours he tried to concentrate on his work. Sweat blinded his eyes and his fingers trembled so that he almost dropped his improvised saw. At minute intervals every function seemed to become suspended and his whole intellect centred in his ears. Why couldn't he forget the band? It wouldn't play. Hadn't Babe assured him of the governor's refusal? Yet it seemed he could do nothing but strain for that sound, a first hopeful note from the bandroom.

THEN to his keyed-up senses there came a warning noise, so intangible that he thought for a moment it was his imagination. There it was again. The tinkle of metal against metal and it came from very close at hand.

Quickly he dodged back to his cot, barely in time to avoid detection by a slinking guard. Only the noise of the metal tip of a cane striking

against the balcony had warned Rand of this fellow's approach.

Without a word the guard opened his cell door a few inches, threw something on the floor, slammed the door shut, locked it and padded away in his rubber-soled shoes.

Puzzled, Lucky Jim stooped, picked up the object and instantly threw it away from him with a sharp exclamation. It was the black *suit.* He need not listen for the band to play tonight. Here was his answer, a shroud.

For a time, he could only lean weakly against the wall of his cage and glare at the hated death clothes. It was the warm ball of fur nestling against his neck that brought him down to earth. He had put on a bold front with Babe and now in the privacy of his cell he must live up to his own words. If Babe went to Marve Ashford, that slimy denizen of the half-world would find a way. In his final outburst of emotionalism he had whispered to Babe the hiding-place of his money. With twenty-one thousand dollars she could move a lot of stones, if—— No, the thought was impossible. Babe would not double-cross him. She was too infatuated for that.

Fighting down an overpowering torpor, he again set to work. A sliver of very hard steel no larger around than a baby's finger stood between him and freedom of the yard. He must cut through it before the guards came to take him away to the death cell adjoining the gallows.

Impatiently, he jabbed at the resisting metal. It was a costly act. The brittle needle snapped in two. And it was the last one he possessed. The almost inaudible sound of it hitting the floor roared like the crack of doom in his ears, blotting out all feeling, leaving him stunned, staring open-mouthed, idiotically, at the useless tool. His long fingers opened without volition, releasing the wooden handle, which hit on his knee and bounced against the stone wall.

A hot raging torrent of senseless anger brought him trembling to his feet. It was a futile anger against Fate, an unreasoning hate of the inanimate bars and granite blocks that conspired to hold him for the executioner. Lunging bull-like against the door, he struck a severed rod with his shoulder. The bar gave way, clattered onto the balcony, bounced a few feet with a ringing sound and then fell with a thud to the yard below.

No sooner was the mad deed done than he regretted it, but it was too late. Sounds of shouting, the hurrying of feet and the groaning of stairs under the weight of a number of men told him guards were coming. From an adjacent cell rose the plaintive voice of a negro murderer, who also was scheduled to be executed on the morrow.

"Kain't yo'all hush up long enuf to be hung?" demanded the colored man irascibly. "Yo carryings-on am sacrilegious, Misto Rand!"

Lucky Jim snapped into action. Brushing the cat from his shoulder with an impatient gesture he grasped another rod, yanked it loose and threw it into a corner of his cell. The third one came away easily also. This he concealed inside his shirt. Then, with a violence born of frenzied fear of death, he wrapped his fingers around the last bar and tugged. It held firmly. Pressing his feet against the wall, he threw his whole weight against it. Still the toughened steel refused to yield.

The next instant he released his grip and slid into the murky interior of his cell.

"It's the con in this drum here," exclaimed a voice from a point very close by. "Why, it's Jim Rand!"

A light smote his eyeballs smartly and instinctively he turned away, crouching into a corner in a vain effort to escape the groping finger.

"Stand over here, Rand," commanded the captain's voice sternly.

Instead of obeying, he shifted so quickly that the light did not follow him at once, and in that moment he saw the captain and two guards peering at him through the aperture he had made. These guards were not allowed to carry firearms inside the prison walls. They couldn't shoot him down. Let them come and try to take him.

"I'll fight," he growled to himself. "I've always won that way and I'll beat 'em now."

In the second that elapsed before he was again blinded with the light he studied his opponents calculatingly. The captain, a short, heavy man, grasped a cane while the two guards had loaded police billies, fastened by leather thongs to the wrists.

"Come over here at once," commanded the captain. "If you don't, I'll come and get you and you'll go up on the board. "And, as if to put this threat into effect, the officer produced a key and unlocked the cell door.

"Look out, Captain," shrilled a guard. "This guy's a bruiser. He'll get you. I'd better turn in a call."

"Let me handle this," retorted the captain, swinging back the door and stepping inside.

JIM ran his fingers inside his shirt and grasped the severed steel bar concealed there. It nestled in his palm nicely. Here was a perfect weapon for close-in fighting. It would make quick work of the bold little swaggerer who stood there now near the exit, only a few feet away, with his cane ready to strike. One sharp blow would break the cane and knock this fellow sprawling, giving him a chance to jump through the half-open door. But there were the guards to deal with, one holding the door ready to slam it shut, the other with club raised poised on the other side as if about to strike a rat as it ran under his feet.

"This is a rotten way to act on the eve of your execution," reprimanded the captain more mildly. "Put down your club and submit. You cannot escape this place. The guards would shoot you dead."

Jim did not deign to reply. Instead he shifted his weight to his toes and began an almost imperceptible cat-like gliding toward the door.

"Yah, yah, yah," wailed the voice of the negro from the adjacent cell. "Whuffo' yo' all fight, fight, fight? Shame yo'self. Pray to de good Lawd and ax fo'gibdness."

"I thought you were game," sneered the captain. "And here you are acting like a welcher. You can't beat the game now, Rand. Why not take your medicine like a man?"

The captain's bleating fell like so much meaningless chatter on Jim's ears. He did not even comprehend the words, so keenly was he bent upon getting through that half-open door. Action had restored all his keen faculties. Cool, deadly determination stimulated every sense and concentrated it upon one thing—the open door.

Clearly he saw the captain take a step forward, but only dimly did he hear the continued blabber.

"Now look here, Rand," the officer argued, "I don't want to muss you up. You won't look very nice going up on the gallows with your face bashed in. Be sensible. Drop that club, put on them clothes and I promise you the feed of your life when you reach the death cell."

"Yah, yah," chortled the negro in

a falsetto voice. "Bring on de fried chicken and de sugar-baked yams."

A laugh went up along "condemned row," a strident, unnatural, hideous mingling of various pitched voices.

"You're letting the smoke show you up, Rand," jeered the prison officer. "He's not afraid to hang. How will it sound in the paper? You show yellow; a negro goes to the gallows singing. You otta have more pride."

In answer, Lucky Jim lunged forward, broke the captain's cane with a short, sharp rap of his iron cudgel, sent the little man reeling with a kick in the stomach and jumped at the door which the guard was swinging shut.

Just as he hit the door the guard let go. Rand felt himself plunging outward, caught vainly at the bars to stop his momentum and brought up against the balcony railing, which hit him squarely across the middle, knocking him breathless. Just as he whirled, something thudded on the back of his skull, streaks of light flashed before his eyes and darkness enveloped him, darkness and kind oblivion.

CHAPTER III

FIGHT!

LIGHTLY he drifted through space, dropping now at tremendous speed to avoid some thin, black body that obscured his vision; rising just as rapidly to avoid tenuous gray arms that threatened to envelope him and drag him back to earth. Far ahead loomed a green oasis and a beautiful palace of glistening marble. Closer and closer it came until something cold struck him in the face and blotted it out.

Choking and clutching at his head, he struggled feebly. Chilling fingers running down his back and shoulders resolved into driblets of water coursing from his soaked head and face. From afar off came the sound of whispering voices, a sound that grew more and more distinct at an astonishing rate. Shadowy forms began to move before his eyes and these as the minutes flew also became more and more real.

Something pressed under each shoulder and his legs began to move; leaden legs they were, so heavy that even a shuffle of the feet filled him with dull, nauseating pains. Then he drifted away again. Forms receded; voices died away; pain vanished as he floated suspended in space for many, many hours. Yet it could not have been so long, either, because when he next heard voices he was still wobbling down the iron steps from "condemned row."

Feet crunching on gravel told him they were passing through the garden. Sharply, all in a gasp, realization came to him. They were taking him to the death chamber. Twice he had watched others trod this route, down the steps from the second story tier, along the winding paths of the garden, around the far end of the hospital building and up three flights of iron steps to a dirty wooden floor. Twice he had endured the deadly quiet that settled over the penitentiary when all the cons were locked in their cells for an execution. And twice he had seen four blue-clad trusties come walking slowly across the yard, carrying a plain, oblong wooden box, and disappear behind the dungeon in the direction of the prison graveyard.

The picture whipped his flagging senses alert and brought his free arm up to thrust at the guard supporting his right shoulder. Then numbness overcame him and he only dimly remembered being thrust up an interminable length of stairs, dragged through a small door, across a room filled with some sort of machinery and into a deserted place with a latticed crib in the center of it.

As he approached this latticed sec-

tion his vision cleared and he saw that it was divided into two rooms and that from one of them came voices, plaintive, soft-toned negro voices, overtopped by the high-pitched tenor of the colored murderer. By good conduct, Ed Wing had won the privilege of putting on a party in his death cell on the eve of his execution.

Ahead of him Rand saw the stocky figure of the captain halt, swing open a gate and motion to the four guards, who lifted him off the ground, boosted him through this opening and left him alone, lying there on the floor, locked in the last room he would occupy on earth.

"Glohy, glohy, hallelulah," shrilled the voice of Ed Wing, and the other colored men took up the song.

Lucky Jim struggled to his feet and swaying there, grasping the lattice work for support, peered through the slatted woodwork. What a mess he had made of it. He must not lose his temper again. The idea of submitting never occurred to him. Let the dumb brutes bare their necks to the noose, but not he. He must keep cool and keep fighting.

ACROSS his line of vision moved a figure, that of a prison guard sauntering slowly along, glancing now and then into the cells which were built so that every corner of them was visible to his inspections at all times. There would be no hiding here. That man's eyes would be on him always. The rickety chair, tiny table and pallet of blankets, sole furnishing of this room, offered not one iota of concealment.

As strength returned, he moved around the wall of his cell, supporting himself with one hand against the woodwork, his eyes taking in every detail. Without a weapon he stood no chance of cutting through the heavy timber that closed him in, and even if he possessed a saw, how could he use it when his every movement was visible to the sentinel?

And suppose he did escape into the larger room and knocked the guard out, what then? Windows protected by steel bars and two doors, both locked and barred, blocked his path. If he got through one of the windows, how could he drop three stories to the cement court below without being killed? And if he escaped through the doors he could hardly traverse the three flights of stairs without being shot.

Escape seemed impossible and yet, strangely enough, he did not give up to despair. In thirty-six years he had turned defeat into victory time and again. Superstitious people said he bore a charmed life. Thrice enemy gangsters had fired into his heart point-blank and had missed, or at least they thought so. Only Lucky Jim himself knew of the plated armor which he always wore next to his skin.

Once, as a boy, a thug had knocked him on the head and thrown him off Green River bridge for dead. When he appeared next day gunning, his assailant departed from that place forever. "Lucky Jim!" exclaimed the thoughtless fools.

Only he knew of the terrible struggle he had endured to hang onto a floating railroad tie, after the headlong dive into the icy water had restored consciousness. Only he knew of the dogged battle he had fought with death, when it would have been much easier and less painful to sink under the water to sweet oblivion. "Lucky Jim!" his friends cried, and though he submitted to the name, it grated on him like the rasp of a file on a man's eyeballs.

Lucky? He had never had a stroke of luck in his life.

Crouching there in the far corner of his death chamber, he allowed his mind to wander back to his boyhood,

and the memory brought a grimace to his cold lips. Expelled from grammar school for cheating because he wouldn't squeal on a friend, he arrived home to find his squalid residence in smoldering ruins and the bones of his parents with it; parents that had been too sodden with liquor to escape.

When he went to look for a job he discovered he was labeled as a wastrel, because his father had been one before him. But that did not stop him. At the time the Consolidated Box Company advertised for a machinist's helper, Jim made up his mind to get the job. Gene Walker, in the line ahead of him, was told by the employment manager to report Monday, and Jim was dismissed with the other applicants. But Gene never showed up on Monday and miraculously Jim Rand was there to take his place. Luck? No such thing. He never left anything to luck, chance, fate or destiny. In fact he knew nothing of these conceptions.

He had one code, "fight," and he applied it to everything. Gene's absence had been arranged in an alley only a few minutes after Master Walker had been hired. At the conclusion Jimmy had pulled a loose tooth from his jaw, threw it vigorously on the ground, and delivered himself in this fashion: "Keep away from here Monday or I'm liable to get mad." And Walker kept away.

It was not until he became a full-fledged machinist, however, that he discovered he possessed qualities that made grown men take him seriously. He wasted no time in abstruse speculations on the psychology of this circumstance. Why look a gift horse in the mouth? Common sense told him to ride the horse for all he was worth and he proceeded to do so.

At noontime out in the yards, even the older fellows listened when he spoke, because he always had something meaningful to say in his cool, calculating, even tone. But even here he had to fight, finally, on the day he opposed the strike. Al Pitts, a hot-headed giant, came forward to squash this youthful upstart, once and for all.

"Kids should be seen, not heard," Al jeered, and with a quick movement he jerked Jim's cap down over his eyes.

Not until he came out of the hospital three days later did he learn that he had triumphed, even in defeat. So gamely had he fought against overwhelming odds that his defeat won him prestige with the men instead of losing it. And then for the first time he learned that fighting had a commercial value. Simmons, the old man, sent for him ostensibly to reprimand him for quarreling.

THE stenographer, on leaving the room, heard and reported to the other workers the sharp sarcastic denunciation voiced by the Consolidated president to this young bully. But neither the stenographer nor anyone else saw Simmons lock the door, motion Jim to a chair, thrust a box of cigars toward him and then make him a most amazing proposition. Musing over it later, Jim realized that the millionaire manufacturer in that twenty-minute interview had recognized him as the new political boss of the Third ward.

Each week Simmons secretly was to mail to him at his home, in a plain envelope, a twenty-dollar bill, in addition to his wages. In return for this Rand was to remain a machinist and to extend his influence among the men until it covered the eight thousand workmen in all the various branches. Particularly he was to help bring about the defeat of the Mayor Toomley crowd, which proposed to enforce the anti-smoke ordinance, force factories to install safety devices, make the big plants keep the streets clear and enforce the law against over-

loaded trucks on the boulevards.

The reforms would hit Simmons hard and so Toomley must go.

He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth now as he remembered the exhilaration of those early days. What a long throw it was from the sweaty, eager crowd in the truck yard of the Consolidated factory to this cold, sinister death cell in state's prison! How he had fought for the supremacy that won him the moniker of "Lucky Jim" from the thoughtless imbeciles. It had been almost absurdly easy to influence the saps, as he called the working herd. The old gang had not been so easy to handle.

After his first big meeting had come Mike Moran from his saloon on Barrier street, where the political destinies of the Third ward had always been determined. And in one short word Mike had given him his orders, "Out!" with a quirk of his thumb toward a passing freight train. But it was Mike who went out instead, down and out before the great ham-like fists of a youth prematurely grown to manhood. And it was Jimmy Rand who bearded Mike's gang in their own den, faced them out with dogged fearlessness and convinced every man of them then and there that he was not only a fighter but a harmonizer as well.

Thus he had become "Boss" Rand, a peculiar sort of a boss who refused to accept political jobs for himself; a boss who regarded the general public as legitimate prey for his friends and yet who played the game squarely with his own kind; a boss who, though heartless, fearless, unscrupulous, seemed to have the ability to bring conflicting interests together with but one object—boodle.

After his fight with Moran he had had few physical combats, but he soon discovered that he must be constantly engaged in another kind of warfare—a battle of wits and will across the caucus tables; tireless stubborn combat in which men sat eye to eye and talked and wheedled, bargained and threatened.

Here also he had been victorious and his power had grown and spread until it covered the entire city, although he still considered his main strength lay with the Third ward gang; the shock troops that had first defeated Mike and then had swept on and on to victory after victory.

Without a single favorable *break* he had warred, until he had won and then, what mockery! They called him "Lucky Jim." The fools thought he had become boss of that city at thirty-six, through luck!

Then the reform wave that had been deluging the entire country hit the city and like a wise general he considered whether to give battle or compromise. The regulars were strongly opposed to the $30,000,000 bond issue for the municipal water and power project, because it was the reformers' opening wedge. Jimmy smiled now as he remembered the consternation he had caused when he boldly anounced himself in favor of it. Simmons, his old boss, had even jumped to his feet and then had fallen back into his chair from a stroke of apoplexy.

Tannerly, the great power magnate, came to crush him that very day, but when they stepped from the caucus room into the platform, after the interview, it was Old Tan who clapped Jim on the shoulder and said:

"Lucky Jim has convinced me he is right. The people want a municipal power plant. Let them have it. I have never been one to stand in the way of public improvement."

PANDEMONIUM broke loose. There were some who even said that Tannerly had gone crazy; that Lucky Jim had something on him; that Boss

Rand had scared the big magnate into the deal. No one guessed the truth because no one knew that Rand had promised practically to give away the people's power and water to Tannerly's combine after the project was completed, nor that Tannerly had agreed to reimburse Jim to the extent of $200,000. Only a few wise heads comprehended that astute Jimmy Rand had stolen the reform movement, lock, stock and barrel, to use it for his own purposes. Meeting a stronger foe, he had won a great victory by a sham capitulation.

And then just at this point Fate had struck him a cruel blow. In a little town outside the pale of his own influence he had been arrested, charged with the murder of Tony Capelli, convicted, and now here he was in prison, waiting to be hanged.

Hanged! The thought jerked his body erect with a menacing animal-like movement; an uncertain swinging of the shoulders like an enraged gorilla, undecided which way to charge.

"Well, Rand, what will you have for dinner?"

The brusque voice of a guard uttering the commonplace question seemed to restore him to normal. With a twinge of pain he slumped into the rickety chair by the tiny table and peered out at the olive drab figure, and at the trustie who wore an apron.

"You can have most anything you want, you know," continued the guard. "Warden's orders. Condemned men can have cigars, chicken, pie, cake, a big feed."

Rand regarded the intruder sullenly. His first impulse was to refuse all food, but he realized that he must conserve his strength in preparation of the struggle on the morrow.

"Cup of coffee, tenderloin well done, couple of cigars," he enumerated shortly.

CHAPTER IV

STEEL

"TEN O'CLOCK and all's well," droned the voice of a guard in the nearest tower, and the words were taken up and repeated all along the parapet, growing fainter and fainter until he could distinguish only a murmur from the distant sentinels.

He dropped his gaze to the dead cigar in his hand and shivered. Twelve hours to live. Ten o'clock tomorrow morning. That was hang-time. It seemed only a few minutes distant, and yet many things might happen in that interval.

Again he shivered and tugged at the sleeves of the black suit, which fell far short of covering his big, goose-fleshed wrists. They had put the black dress on him while he was unconscious back there in "condemned row." His attention was drawn to it now for the first time by its obvious inadequacy. This damp cellar-like air ate into his very heart and the death suit afforded scant protection.

As he pulled impatiently at the cheap black cloth his fingers encountered something in the basted cuff, something that rustled like paper. More carefully he tugged and again he felt it. Quickly, he crumbled the folds in his fingers and there was a distinct sound of paper being crushed.

"Why don'tcha wrap up in them blankets?"

There stood the guard, a few feet away, peering at him through the bars and motioning toward the pallet where he was to sleep.

Slowly, Rand allowed his hands to drop to his side while he studied the sentinel's face keenly. Had the fellow heard? The crumbling of that paper had beat loudly in his ears. Could it have reached those of his captor?

In two strides he reached the point where the guard stood and fixed his eyes on the broad, expressionless face. One glance satisfied him.

"Thanks," he said. "I thought of that, but I hated to touch the damned things."

With a professional glance around the cell, the guard turned away and continued his promenade. He had instructions not to talk to the condemned men, but he had taken pity on Rand when he saw him shivering with the cold.

Rand crept over to the pallet, pulled a blanket over him and under this cover he ripped out the threads in his sleeve with his finger nails, working very cautiously so that the guard would not detect his movements.

The strumming of guitars and banjos sounded in the other death cell, but he paid no heed to it. Negro voices were raised in Southern melodies that would have touched another heart, but to him it was just a fortunate distraction for the guard.

In a few seconds he had the paper in his hand and was feeling the small, oblong object it contained. Someone had bribed the prison tailor to secrete this thing in his death suit, but what could it be? To his sense of touch, through the folds of the paper it seemed like a thin, hard wafer-like object, hardly more than an inch long and a half inch wide. It couldn't be a weapon. It was too small for that. And it was too thin to be a container unless it was a cardboard containing poison; a deadly drop of something that would enable him to cheat the rope after all. And the paper? It would contain a message. At the last moment his friends had sent him a missive of hope.

This savored of the work of Gentleman Joe Yorke who made his living smuggling morphine into the prison by throwing it over into the garden at night for the farm trusties to pick up. Gentleman Joe was connected with the gang through Marve Ashley, professional bondsman, whose contributions to campaign funds gave him special privileges at the city and county jails, and perhaps at state's prison also.

Now he must find a way to read that note, and how could he do it under the very eyes of the guard? Slowly his eyes roamed around the room until they rested on a black leather-bound book that lay on the tiny table. There was the answer. He must do a little pretending.

HEAVING the covers off, he strode heavily to the table; slumped down into the chair and picked up the Bible. Dexterously and with a quick movement of his fingers he slipped the paper between the leaves of the book and began to read. He realized that he must do this naturally, so he actually began to read, in a low voice, but aloud:

> Go to, now ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you. Your riches are corrupted and your garments are moth eaten. Your gold and silver are cankered; and the result of them shall be witness against you and shall eat your flesh as if it were fire. Behold the hire of the laborers who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back by fraud——

Lifting the book with its back to the sentinel, he turned the page that uncovered the message. As he did so the metallic object dropped into his cupped hand. It was a safety razor blade, still wrapped in its oiled tissue covering. And there on the brown bit of wrapping paper were six words, pencil written in a bold hand. Six words that sent a tremor through his big body; words of life and death significance and yet at the same time enigmatic, puzzling.

At one glance he memorized the

smuggled message, then turned the pages to cover it up, and leaned forward to gaze unseeingly at the small biblical print.

T quit delav see reporters
Babe.

"Tannerly quits, eh?" he muttered. "And Babe went to Marve. Good Lord!"

HE looked up to find the guard staring at him fixedly. He answered the glance with a scowl and again pretended to read, uttering the words half aloud: "riches corrupted—gold and silver cankered—hire of laborers kept back by fraud——"

Then he realized what he was reading and he turned quickly to another passage. "Now if I was superstitious," he pondered, "I'd say it was a bad sign to hit on a threatening paragraph like that. 'Go to ye rich men. Weep and howl, for your miseries shall come upon you.' Huh! And I'm rich. 'Fraud.' Yes, by God, by fraud. Funny I never thought of that before."

The guard turned away and his mind shot back to the message. Clasping the razor blade between his fingers, he arose ponderously and resumed his blanketed pose on the pallet. The last two words in the note held hope of action; of some resource unknown to him. "See reporters." That meant newspaper reporters.

Members of this inquisitive tribe had meant little in his life. Neither their editorial jibes nor their eulogies had ever affected him. If anything, he had regarded them as a sort of necessary nuisance. But now they promised to play an important part in his escape, for escape he would.

Babe was fighting for him! He had been a fool to doubt her. At the thought, his mind conjured up a picture of the plain-faced, gray-eyed girl, who had stuck to him after everyone else had deserted, and suddenly he was swept by a futile rage; a rage at himself for the harshness he had displayed toward her, and hate for Ashford, the unspeakable roué. He could see her now looking up at him with tears in her eyes, lips quivering from the hurt he had inflicted.

Why had he said nothing when she proposed going to Ashford? Yes, he had understood her perfectly. "He'll go to bat on this, if I ask him—right," she had said, and even then the sinister significance of the words had penetrated his consciousness, but without effect. Something had changed in him. He felt differently now.

For the first time, he was giving consideration to someone other than himself. This was a strange new field in which he found himself; where things could not be measured in terms of dollars and cents, and his emotions puzzled him and made him wonder if he was weakening under the strain.

And now she had gone to Ashford, a man unfit for human touch, and she had paid to set the underworld wheels in motion that he might go free, knowing the full price of her act. That meant the gang had thrown him over as a dead one and that all the others had given up.

"There'll be a new deal when I get out of here," he muttered savagely, drawing the blanket tighter around his chilled shoulders — 'riches corrupted—gold and silver cankered.' There's a lot of truth in that. What good does all my money do me now? What good does all the money I've made for Tannerly and Simmons and Waverly do me? They hate me for it. The only thing that'll save me now is something that didn't cost me nothin'—Babe Mc-

Mahon. I gave her a few grins and maybe a kick or two. I'm cashing in on the grins now, because she's forgot the kicks. A few kind words, the only ones I ever gave out, are gonna save my life."

From the adjacent cell came a plaintive, wailing melody "—One more ribber to cross—," dinning in his ears. Then the tune broke off abruptly and a new voice spoke!

"Well, Ed, is there a last request you wish to make?" It was the warden's voice, speaking. "If it is within reason, I will grant it."

Silence followed, broken only by a shuffling of feet on the floor.

"Well, Misto Warden," came in hesitating tones, "ah'd lack to mek one reques' for dese hyar cullud men. Ah don' wanna eat all dis chicken. Ah kain't eat it all. Please, Misto Warden, gib it to dese foh niggahs. Dey ain't gwine get no chicken and cake foh a long tahm."

"Certainly, that's all right," was the reply. "They can take the stuff to their cells. Now is there anything else?"

"Yes," Ed continued, gaining confidence. "Ah craves to dance a jig on de gallows."

The warden cleared his throat.

"Ah just feels lak dancing a jig," urged the negro stubbornly. "Dis is mah own execution, de ony one ah's ever had or eber will hab, and dey ain't gwine be no wailin' and gnashin' of teeth."

"Hm, hm!" said the Warden. "You try to get a good sleep tonight, Ed. And if you feel the same way about it tomorrow, you let me know. Goodnight, Ed."

RAND had arisen and was standing at the table with the Bible in his hands, when he first glimpsed the clean-cut, bespectacled countenance of the warden through the wooden-slatted barrier. Behind the warden loomed the rotund figure of the prison chaplain.

"Well, Rand, is there anything I can do for you?" asked the warden.

Lucky Jim closed the book and looked down at the two men as if they were intruders. He made no move to approach, but his eyes searched out, first, the large dark ones of the prison head in a swift appraising scrutiny, and held there.

"I want to see the newspaper reporters in the morning," he requested, curtly. "I have a statement to make."

"Very well," retorted the warden, with equal curtness. "I will admit them in the morning before the execution."

Jim lowered his eyes with a wry grimace. At that sinister final word, uttered so slowly, so deliberately, even he could not retain his composure. Execution! That meant a rope around his neck, choking him to death. When he looked up, the warden's face had been replaced by that of the chaplain, who smugly surveyed him with a sort of spiritual complacence.

"And now, my boy, I hope you have decided to accept a higher consolation," he said in a low, deep voice.

Rand slouched over to the wall with a quick irritated movement and thrust his face close to that of the minister.

"See here, if I tell you something will you leave me alone?" he demanded. "Since I've been in this place, you've never heard me yelp once about being innocent, have you? No, of course you haven't. Why? I'll tell you why! Every welcher that gets sloughed to the big house pulls the old alibi. It's been done so much it don't mean anything.

"But I'm going to tell you, now, that I'm innocent. And since I'm innocent I don't need no consolation.

You'd better console the guys that are gonna kill me tomorrow. They'll have a lot to answer for."

Just as I said on the witness stand, I didn't murder Tony Capelli. He reached for his gun first and I hit him. And then the guy that was with Capelli, hiding in the dark, shot at me just at Tony jumped up, and he killed Capelli instead of me.

"Just as the constable ran up, I fired at Tony's pal, but missed. He was in the dark. I could barely see a shape. The constable said I shot Tony, but he was wrong. It happened just like I'm telling you. That's all. Good-night."

The chaplain went, leaving him alone. Then came the reaction. Despite an effort of will, he leaned against the wall of his cage and shook as if from ague. He was emotionally exhausted.

From down in the prison yard sounded the sentinel's call, "Eleven o'clock and all's well."

Eleven more hours to live!

In the other death cells there were sounds of the party breaking up, lugubrious expressions of commiseration and farewell, the clumping of feet, the creak of a door and then the slamming and locking of portals, as the visitors departed. At last all was quiet. The two condemned men, negro and white, were left alone in their cells with only their thoughts to keep them company.

CHAPTER V.

THE LAST ECHO

THE cold morning light filtering in through the dirty windows of the vaulted room reached through the lattice of a large crib and touched the head and shoulders of a man who sat hunched on a pallet of blankets, staring straight into space with unseeing eyes that had not tasted of sleep the whole night through.

It was not the thought of hanging that had kept Jim Rand awake. Rather, it was even such an abstract subject as self-sacrifice, upon which he had pondered hour on hour, with a mind unaccustomed to dealing with abstractions. He had always held to concrete things such as blood and money and real estate and political jobs. He never recalled even hearing such a word as self-sacrifice until he muttered it aloud to himself there in his death cell.

Thoughts of Babe McMahon had instilled something new into his life and he was trying to determine if it was good or evil, maudlinism or strength in a new form. It constantly impelled him to go over to that partition and speak a consoling word to the broken creature in the adjacent cell, although obviously that would be a silly thing to do, since Ed Wing never could do him any good. That savored too much of sentiment for Jimmy Rand.

When he felt entirely alone and isolated, there came to him out of the stillness of the night a strange sense that the black, black void around him was throbbing with life, an orderly life with which he was out of step. The peculiar vibratory pulsations within his own body, which sent the life-blood coursing through his veins, took on an air of mystery, and presently his thoughts caught the swing and a new peace came to him.

Yet it was a disturbing peace that wiped out all his egotistical conceptions and left him bewildered at the abrupt recognition of his own insignificance in this scheme of things. His whole philosophy had been built upon the theory that he was the center of all the activities that whirled about him. This new humility, born of reason, wiped out all

his standards for measuring conduct and destroyed his reckoning.

What matter if he should die, after all? He had seen other men, greater than he, pass on and it had not changed the course of the world one iota. After all, he was but one American in a hundred odd million. When his mind tried to conceive what one hundred millionth part might be, he could not compass it, which meant that he could not comprehend the extent of his insignificance.

Hardly a speck of matte ron the old globe would be changed by his hanging. Some two hundred pounds of tissue would be reduced to an inanimate mass, a process that was inevitable, anyhow. The execution merely would set the time ahead a few score years. His form would be reduced to dust and from it new life would unfold to complete the cycle.

He had once heard a couple of doctors talking like that at the Saracen Club and he thought then they were wasting their time, but it seemed now he had not forgotten a single word of their argument. That was about the time he was concluding the big deal with Tannerly. Inwardly he had sneered at those physicians with their petty chatter, which seemed very silly indeed compared with his $200,000 deal. Money was the all powerful, all conquering force, he thought then. Now it seemed very trivial indeed. What good was money to a man about to die?

His thoughts reverted to the Biblical passage: "——Ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you——" And then there had been a dire threat, with something about corrupted riches and cankered gold and silver that shall eat the flesh as if it were on fire. Cankered gold obtained by fraud! He had obtained all his gold by fraud. What punishment awaited him?

BUT no, there would be no future punishment. Some of his best friends believed that a man had a soul, and they regularly paid fees to various organizations to save it. Rand had had occasion to play these soul-saving organizations one against the other on several occasions, to arouse antagonism and prevent the workers getting together against the gang, but aside from that he had given them no consideration.

Now that he came to speculate upon his own soul, he discovered that his ideas on the subject were very simple and mechanical, quite concrete and material, as one would expect in a man who had always dealt in physical facts.

He conceived his soul as the filament of a lamp, lighted by an inexhaustible, invisible electricity (or power) that filled the universe. Death came with shutting off the switch, thus severing contact between the body and the omnipresent force. What the nature of this contact might be, he did not know, but certain physical facts regarding it seemed to be true. A rifle bullet piercing the heart, a noose breaking the neck could disconnect it, the filament would grow dark, the body inanimate and then—oblivion.

Oblivion, death, extinction! He closed his eyes tightly and tried to remember his sensations when passing into a state of unconsciousness. They had not been unpleasant sensations. Rather his body had felt cool and light and care-free, just before the blackness descended. And this blackness itself had not been so terrible, either.

A sudden idea brought his head erect, eyes wide open, every nerve a-tingle. The truth dawned on him abruptly. Death itself did not ter-

rify him. It was the *thought of death* that made him tremble with fear. Now if he could only die quietly in his cell that night instead of enduring the long suspense before the gallows, oblivion would have little horror for him.

With his finger-nail he stripped the sharp steel razor blade of its oiled cover and caressed the keen cutting edge. To pass this over his wrist would cause scarcely any pain at all; yet in a few hours it would permit his life-blood to ebb gently away and he would drift leisurely into the black void.

"No," he cried aloud, jumping to his feet. "No!"

"What is it?" cried the startled guard, hurrying toward him. "What is the matter?"

"Oh Lawd, oh Lawd," moaned the negro loudly.

Rand dropped back onto the blankets and looked up furtively. His moments of abstraction had passed and he was back to earth again, facing the problem of fighting his way to freedom. He made no reply to the sentinel who, after watching him suspiciously for several minutes, resumed his patrol. Nor had he any desire to calm his negro companion, who now was giving vent to the most lugubrious cries.

It was the guard who finally approached Ed's crib and said:

"Brace up, young fellow. They'll bring your breakfast in a little while and you will feel better."

"Ah don' wan' no breakfas'," was the reply, followed by a long-drawn groan. "Foh de Lawd, misto man, ah'm too sick to go to de hanging."

A pan of cold water and a towel were thrust into Rand's cell. After a few minutes he placed the pan on the little table and doused his face. Rubbing his newly grown beard gave a disagreeable feeling. He was unaccustomed to the scraggly growth, which out of sheer sullenness he had permitted to cover his face.

After a breakfast of coffee, hot cakes and bacon and eggs, he began to feel quite normal and his mind began working actively on his plan of combat. He would fight them when they came for him. He would battle en route to the gallows. And afterward he would find means to put up a terrific struggle on the platform of the scaffold. The razor blade would not be a good weapon for this work, he realized at once. He must find something better than that.

In gazing around his cell his eye finally rested on a leg of the little table, and he fully decided that he would tear off this leg to use as a bludgeon when the time was ripe. Babe, in her note, had warned him to delay. Even if he couldn't get free, he could fight and fight and fight to put off the execution until the last minute. And then if worst came to worst there was the wafer of steel——

He looked up to find the chaplain gazing at him between the bars.

"When will the reporters arrive?" Rand asked, casually.

"Not until 9:45," was the reply. "Sit down, my boy. I must talk to you."

Lucky Jim remained standing, eyeing the minister coldly.

"Can nothing touch you?" pleaded the other. "Have you no dear ones to whom you wish to send a message?"

He shook his head in the negative.

"I'll make my speech to the newspaper men," he said.

"Are you prepared to meet your Maker?" demanded the chaplain in a passionate outburst.

Rand took a step backward, then lowered his eyes. If they had de-

signed all this to break his spirit, they could not have calculated better. There was something about the solemn insistence of the preacher that struck a chill to his heart.

"I'll never hang," he asserted vehemently through his teeth.

THE chaplain was silent for a space. Then he kneeled and bowed his head between his hands. No words came from his lips. Rand stood looking down at him, dumb, fascinated, uncomprehending. What was this weakness that filled him with a mad impulse to fall on his knees there and join in the invocation?

A SHUFFLING, subdued clumping of feet on wood warned of the approach of a group even before the figures appeared. The warden came first, behind him were two guards and trailing came two men in civilian clothes and a girl, darkly veiled. The Captain of the Yard brought up the rear with a delicate, white-haired old man, the prison physician.

The two guards halted at Ed Wing's cell. One of them carried a belt, which Rand knew was used to bind a man's hands to his sides. The Captain unlocked the door and all went in. From the adjoining crib came the voice of the negro raised in a moan of anguish: "Gawd hab mercy——"

The prison physician said: "I'll give you something to make you feel better, Ed."

The warden came up to Rand's cell. "Here are the newspaper people," he said, and stepped aside.

Trying hard to control his eagerness, Lucky Jim moved close to the slatted barrier and glanced quickly at the faces of the two young men, and then his eyes sought out the third figure, that of the girl who held back. For a moment he thought he had distinguished something familiar about her, something that buoyed up his spirit, but now she was hidden behind the others and he could not be sure. But the hope gave him patience to answer the questions the others propounded, and to wait.

"I am about to be murdered," he said casually when asked for a statement. "When an innocent man is deliberately killed, that's murder, ain't it?"

A quick movement of one of his auditors brought the girl's face into view for an instant, and even through the veil he recognized her, yes, even before she made that quick, characteristic nervous gesture with her hand to her mouth.

It was Babe McMahon. She had risked coming here, posing as a reporter, in order to deliver some significant message. What could it be? Did this mean he would be pardoned?

By no sign did he indicate that he had recognized her, but his impatience grew and grew until he was barely able to reply in a civil tone to the usual reportorial questions.

Presently he did interrupt them with a sharp gesture.

"But I am not interested in this now," he asserted. "In a few minutes I am to hang. Can't you imagine my feelings? What if you knew you had to die in thirty minutes?" he flashed at them, shooting a glance from one to the other.

Again there came a startled movement from the girl, a movement all the more expressive because she uttered no sound.

The tall man evaded his gaze and grimaced unhappily. Then slowly he turned and walked away with a mumbled word of farewell, followed by the other reporter.

Babe was at him in an instant.

"My paper got a tip you're to be pardoned," she said, hurriedly, loud

enough for a guard nearby to hear her. "Is that correct?"

Rand remained perfectly still for several seconds. Every function seemed suspended. He felt fixed like a stone statue. It seemed to him that he was very calm, and yet when he tried to think or formulate words, he felt confused. It was a counterfeit calm that dried the mouth and withered his heart.

"Pardoned?" he muttered, thickly.

"It's a straight tip," Babe continued, significantly, trying hard to keep her tone even and cool. "A last minute pardon—just before, just before——"

"I understand," he interrupted, more calmly. They got the hangman, eh? They got him?" He rubbed his hands over the black clothes, to rid them of perspiration. "They're workin' on him, huh? The governor? Yes." He leaned closer. "They've gotta hurry," he muttered vehemently. "I don't want to die."

Her white ungloved hand reached through the bars, large, competent fingers grasped his cold ones and as she trembled there he saw, even through the veil, that her eyes were shot with tears. From her parted lips came one sibilant choked word, "Fight," and then as the warden stepped forward to interfere she was gone.

He staggered slightly, caught at the wall for support and then clung there, listening until the last echo of her footfalls died away. He had pinned his hope upon that visit. He had waited with such eagerness for the arrival of reporters, and for what? To be told of this forlorn hope. To be told to fight when he had been doing nothing else all his life. False tales to buoy him up! What could save him now?

THE rattle of keys as the negro's cell door swung open made him to turn in that direction. The chaplain stepped out, his head bowed, lips muttering a low spoken prayer. Near him was the warden, a downcast figure upon whom all this weighed heavily. Then came Ed between two guards, his hands strapped to his sides, shuffling rather than walking. In the rear was the prison physician.

Spellbound, he watched the procession move slowly along a little strip of matting to the door, heard the door open and close after them and clenched his hands as a solemn hush fell upon the building.

Suddenly came a slight jar. It was as if a heavy weight had dropped to the floor. It brought him to his feet, his fingers tearing at his hair.

"Great God!" he cried aloud. "Great God!"

And for the first time in his life he uttered that name more in prayer than in imprecation.

CHAPTER VI.

THIRTEEN STEPS

THEN they came for him. He heard the door of the execution chamber creak open. There they were, moving toward his cage. To his inflamed imagination the party seemed like an army of fiends descending upon him. Faces became grotesque, hideous.

Running over to the table, he wrenched loose a leg and then, with a shuffling, slouching movement suggestive of a slinking cat, he retreated to the farther corner of his cell. Delay! That was the command she had written him. Fight! was the last word that dropped from her lips as they had parted. He must delay the execution. Desperately, he clung to a forlorn hope. A pardon would come. It must come. But what if it arrived too late?

Keys clicked against the lock. The

door swung open. Three guards entered. One carried the queer looking belt. It was the thing that had bound the negro's hands by his side. Where was this negro now?

Now they were coming at him like automatons, approaching closer and closer, pinning him in the corner.

Abruptly his brain cleared and he studied his opponents cunningly as he gripped the table leg. One khaki-clad fellow seemed timid, afraid. His eyes were wide with alarm. There was his point of attack.

"There's no use fighting, Rand," said the captain of the yard, sharply. He had come up behind the three guards, who had halted and were regarding the condemned man suspiciously. "Go ahead and take him, you fellows," continued the officer.

The taller guard lunged at him. At the same instant he jumped to one side and swung the table leg at the captain, just as his left fist smashed into the guard's jaw. Then he rushed the timid fellow, club upraised, and carried him well along the wall. With a sweeping blow he stopped the third guard and then turned to meet the captain, who had recovered and now was leaping at him with his loaded cane raised.

There they fenced, the little hard-eyed man and the sneering, white-faced giant. Cane clashed against club. He drove the captain toward the door by sheer weight, but he could not beat him down. The fellow was tough as steel. He did not yield. The timid youth, urged on by the captain, came at him from behind. Rand kicked out as the man jumped at him, caught him on the hip and knocked him flat. Then he aimed a vicious swing at the officer in charge, a blow which tore the cane from the officer's hands and sent it clattering to the floor.

He sprang for the door, which stood half open. Just as he reached it, some one slammed it shut. The lock clicked, he was trapped.

With his back to the grating, he again faced the guards, just as three of them flew at him. Arms encircled his waist. Fingers tore at his weapon. Something strong and merciless gripped his throat and shut off his wind.

Like a great cougar fighting a hound pack he ripped them away, wrenched the torturing fingers from his throat and lurched across the room, carrying the Lilliputs along with him. He knocked them down. He threw bodies. Never had his giant physique stood him in such good stead. Heads clicked together. Forms thudded on the wood partitions and floor. One command drummed in his brain to drive him on— "Delay, delay, delay!"

But even though he conserved his strength by trickery, even though he kept on the defensive with his back in a corner so that they could approach him only from the front, he realized he could not keep this up for long. It was an uneven fight. Four men to one. He could not get in a knockout blow. When he swung, someone was clutching at his arm. No sooner did he floor an opponent than another took his place. The black shirt was ripped and his body ached in a dozen places where the canes had struck.

He must stop that flailing. Twice now a cane had hit his head and dizzied him. Seeing a chance, he lunged at the larger of the guards and struck out. As he did so the little captain made a flying tackle. He tripped, sprawled. Guards dived on top of him. When he heaved upward, something hit sharply against his skull. Nausea warned him that he must not become unconscious, else he might lose that precious razor-blade that he had palmed.

Feigning unconsciousness, he lay

there, breathing lightly. Indeed voices sounded vaguely in his ears now. One more wallop and he would have been out.

Out of the corner of his eyes he saw the captain pick up the belt. When one of the guards raised him slightly to permit the belt being slid under him, he moved, groaned and slashed at it, carefully, as it lay beneath him right near the buckle. Then he relaxed again with the steel blade concealed between two big fingers.

After the belt was fastened around his waist, his wrists were caught and fastened down to it. Cautiously he wiggled his fingers and a feeling of elation crept over him as he found he could move them enough to again slash at the leather thong.

But his relief was short-lived.

"Here's the board," said a guard. "Lift him up."

Rand was raised off the floor slightly and a board was slid under him. Before he knew what was happening a heavy leather band tightened across his chest, another bound his middle and two more laced his ankles firmly to the surface. In a minute he was trussed to the board like an Indian papoose. So this was what the captain meant back there in "condemned row" when he said: "You'll go up on the board." He was entirely helpless. The fight was over.

WITH much groaning and straining the guards heaved his two hundred pounds erect. Still pretending unconsciousness, he allowed his body to sag, but the board kept him erect. His feet barely touched the floor.

Two men grasped the head of the board while another took the foot and moved laboriously through the cell door and out onto the little strip of matting that the negro had tread to his death.

Rand's mind was working now like lightning. He had only one hope now, strategy. Even if he did not escape, he must prevent this ignominious thing. It increased the horror of hanging many-fold to be carried out like this, as if he were too weak to stand.

"Don't," he protested. "I'll walk, captain. Don't do this."

It galled him to utter those pleading words, the first he had ever uttered to any man. But he must make them believe that his spirit was broken, his defiance was gone.

And so it seemed to the captain, who was but too willing to avoid this spectacle. Only once in a decade had it been necessary to strap a man to the board for hanging. It made the task doubly disagreeable.

"Remove the board," he said. "The man's helpless, broken. He won't fight any more."

Rand, with his feet on the ground, felt suddenly strong again. The sharp throbbing of his body and the aching of his head only stimulated his senses. He swayed weakly, using the movement to cover another attempt to slash the thong at his right wrist. As he wobbled erect again, he exerted pressure upon the strap. It gave slightly. Yes, he could free his right arm now with a healthy wrench, cut loose his left with one twist of the razor edge and give battle on the gallows to delay this thing further.

So excited was he over this new possibility that he saw no significance in the presence of the warden and chaplain standing ahead of him, until the two guards holding his hands pushed him ahead. Then with a shudder, he realized that the procession had begun. The guards exerted a constant pressure upon him to keep him moving. It reminded him of something he had seen at a cattle-yard; men with sharp sticks prodding steers until they ran down a narrow pen where they were hit on the head with an axe.

"God have mercy on his soul," chanted the chaplain.

They moved slowly like a funeral cortège, walking along a matting provided for the purpose, to deaden the sound of their footfalls. The procession halted for an instant before the door leading to the execution chamber. The door swung open. He faced it and looked through into the hideous place. Before him stood the gallows, a rough board scaffold, surmounted by a tiny house and uprights and cross-arms that held a rope. The thing held his gaze. A gripping feeling went through his body.

Resolutely, he tore his eyes away and looked into faces. Human beings were there, sitting in a row of chairs, for all the world like the audience at a motion picture show. Men, men everywhere but no women. Well, he had expected that. Babe could not be there because women were barred. They met his gaze, these spectators, with curiosity, compassion, horror, fear, blood-hunger. They were eager for the spectacle, impatient to see a man killed. He had killed men, in a fair fight, but he never had enjoyed it.

People called him hard, vicious, cold-blooded and yet he would never have made a spectacle of killing a man, nor would he have attended such a spectacle. What was in the brains of these people? What was in their hearts that made them come here panting with lascivious bloodlust?

The chaplain and the warden began to mount the steps. "God have mercy on his soul," bellowed the chaplain in an impressive voice.

Rand smiled at the fellow's pomposity as he counted the steps, counted them one by one, he knew not why. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve—thirteen, and he was at the top. Yes, he had been told the truth. There were thirteen steps to the gallows.

THEY halted on the platform, facing the audience. A guard carrying a black bag-like affair came toward him. They were going to slip this thing over his head. He slumped a little to throw his guards off their balance and prepared to jerk his arms free.

"Do you wish to make a statement?" cut in the voice of the warden.

Rand straightened up again. Yes, he must make a statement; it would mean just that much more delay.

"Yes," he said shortly. "I'd like to say a word."

He walked to the rail, paused dramatically and scrutinized each face individually. There was something so terrible about the blaze in his eyes that men lowered their heads before it. Then suddenly he beamed on them, benevolently, friendly, while they gawked open-mouthed, until they caught the contemptuous mockery in his eyes.

"As I look into your happy faces, it is hard for me to believe you've come here to enjoy my murder," he said suavely. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the warden give a start and cast a frowning glance at the captain, but he continued: "In my world, the underworld you call it, men kill with the knife and gun in fair fight and foul. But I've never yet seen the worst guttersnipe make a spectacle of it by sending out printed invites to his friends.

"You Christian gents have taught me a lesson, a lesson in moral depravity. Down in my ward there's a mob of hop peddlers who kill men's bodies and minds with slow poison—dope. I used to think they was the scum of the earth until I seen a bunch of men that like to watch a human being tortured. I wouldn't want my

hophead friends to learn that I mentioned them in the same breath with you."

"That will do," shouted the warden. "Captain Huxley——"

Rand turned toward the warden, saw the man with the black cap advancing, and with a mighty effort he ripped his hand free of the thong. It took a terrible wrench, but in his half-maddened state he accomplished it. In another instant he slashed his left hand free and even as he raised it placed both palms on the railing and vaulted to the floor below.

Shouts, shrieks of fear, the loud clatter of chairs echoed his exultant cry. Someone blocked his path, and he experienced the odd sensation of jamming his great fist into a yielding substance that gave forth a groan.

The door leading into the room containing the machinery gave to his shoulders and he ran to the one through which he had been led on first entering the building. Visitors had been coming in and out of it. It could not be locked. He plunged at it. Behind him someone was yelling a command to halt. He rejoiced now in the prison ruling that no one was allowed to carry firearms inside the walls.

His hands tore at the knob just as a pursuing guard reached him with cane upraised. He took the blow on his shoulder, side-stepped and floored his pursuer with a blow to the ear. The door came open, and he dodged out onto the third floor balcony of the stairs.

Down the steps he went, three at a time, with his pursuers only a few yards behind him. He was almost to the ground now. A man in khaki stepped out to meet him, cane upraised. Over against the wall he saw a guard, futilely brandishing his rifle, afraid to shoot for fear of hitting his fellow officers.

Pausing just for an instant on the second step, he leaped full into the arms of the guard with both feet and they went down together. Snatching up the guard's uniform cap and cane he bounded across the alleyway and into the tunnel that traversed the hospital building.

The wide, dark way was deserted and no one from the outside could see him here. All the prisoners were locked up, so no guards were needed in this place.

REACHING the other end of the tunnel, which gave in upon the garden beautiful, he hesitated just a moment. If he stepped outside, he would be in full view of the guards on the wall and of anyone in the upper yard. But behind him came his pursuers. He must risk it.

Adjusting the officer's cap on his head and swinging his cane, he dodged outside and ran along the front of the hospital. The fog had vanished and the sun, shining brightly, pitilessly, upon the cement court, stabbed at his eyes and sent him shrinking into the hospital building. Here again he found no one.

On the right were the stairs that led to the upper wards. On the left, a white door opening into the operating-room. He turned to the left and experienced a feeling of surprise when the door opened to his touch, admitting him to a corridor, at the far end of which he could see the operating tables and a case of surgical instruments. In front of him was the closed door of the doctor's private office.

He was calm now. Capture was but a matter of a few hours, but at any rate he could prolong it in the hope that the pardon might arrive. Even if it did not, he would give a good account of himself before they captured him. He did not fear to die fighting.

In the operating-room he flung open the glass instrument case and surveyed the tools there. Scalpels, surgical shears, saws and a knife, razor-edged, were there. He gripped the knife eagerly and turned to the door again. The prison bell began to clang loudly. It sounded the general alarm. A prisoner had escaped, and *he* was that prisoner.

Through the barred window at the end of the hall he saw a guard running. The prison yard soon would be full of those fellows. There was no escape that way. And yet he might be discovered here at any moment.

Stepping quickly to the doctor's door, he tugged on the knob. It was locked. With an ingenuity born of desperation, he probed at it with the knife, pushed against the metal tongue, drove it back and pulled the door open. Then, glancing furtively around he dodged inside and closed it. As the lock clicked such a feeling of relief surged over him that he was forced to lean against the panel for support.

But his joy was short-lived.

Something drew his eyes to the barred office window. He saw a face. The captain of the yard. The captain was looking through the bars at him. And as he stared, other faces appeared behind and beside that of the captain. There were guards, the warden and the prison doctor. He was trapped.

CHAPTER VII

THE SPARK AGLOW

THE half-nude man in the torn black death clothes arched his great body and thrust out his head. His eyes met those of the captain, stare for staer. There was something suggestive of a wild man about him, a tiger-cat at bay.

He sneered, torn lips, bruised crimson drawn back over his teeth. From a wound in his tousled head, blood trickled down over the scraggly black growth of beard and dropped upon the bare shoulders and chest. Across one arm hung a shred of black cloth, only remnant of his shirt. His hairy torso, covered with fresh scars, red from pummeling, still bearing the marks of the guards' canes, was bare to the waist.

He moved backward toward the door, his rippling muscles and the undulating smoothness of his tread suggesting a lion's strength. It was a picture for the newspapermen; a never-to-be-forgotten living painting of a human animal at bay. There in the clean little office crouched the man-beast, snarling his defiance. Peering through the barred window, the guards, reporters and witnesses assumed the rôle of spectators as if at a museum watching the antics of a caged wildcat.

"Lay down your knife, Rand," commanded the captain, waving a yellow telegraph sheet. "Your sentence has been commuted."

Rand continued to stare incredulously. This must be a trick to disarm him, he thought.

The tall newspaper man moved his head close to the bars.

"That's straight, Rand," he agreed. "The Governor granted a commutation of sentence at the last moment."

Lucky Jim faltered, swayed slightly, caught himself against the wall.

"It's a lie," he growled. "A trick."

"The man who killed Capelli confessed on his deathbed," insisted the reporter. "You're saved."

He was sure now it was a trick. He had killed Cappelli himself in a fair fight. That other man had been his own invention. There was no other man. They were simply trying to trick him. And then he thought of Babe's significant remark about the pardon and her previous refer-

ence to Marve Ashford, the frame-up king. Frame-up——

Rolling groggily over to the barred window, he lifted his head with an effort and fixed his eyes on the light gray ones of the news sleuth. Truth was written there. The fellow was not lying.

"Reprieved," he mumbled dully. "Reprieved."

He wobbled weakly, slumped to the floor, tried to recover and fell prone. The knife flew across the room, his fingers clutched toward it and then he relaxed. He had fainted.

LUCKY Jim Rand recovered to find himself in a white iron bed near a barred window, which looked down upon the upper prison yard and the garden beautiful. For several minutes his overtaxed brain failed to realize the full significance of his position, then he began to take in the things around him. From where he lay he could see out over the stone walls and even glimpse a white sail sweeping along over the placid surface of the bay. There lay freedom. Men were not caged. Over that wall was another world, a beautiful place where chains and bars and prison guards were unknown.

He shifted his position so that he could see the guard on the wall. It was a man in olive drab, carrying a rifle carelessly in the crook of his arm. He walked back and forth along the top of the wall, looking down into the yard.

Cautiously he raised on one elbow and then, finding that he had plenty of reserve strength, he sat up erect and slipped out of bed. It was wonderful how one night's rest had cured his throbbing head and dispelled the smarting of his beaten body.

An old man in an adjacent cot spoke feebly:

"You better lay still, kid. Doc will be sore. Here he comes now."

The white-haired physician entered, saw Rand in the act of standing up, and came to him quickly.

"How are you?" he demanded briskly. "How does the head feel?"

"All right," Lucky Jim replied shortly, "I'm going to get up."

Without a word, the physician motioned to a trusty, who came forward with a box, which he placed on the foot of the bed, cut open and drew out a coat of blue serge. After the coat came trousers, vest, a white shirt, underclothing, socks and a pair of shoes—not prison-made brogans, but finely polished patent leathers.

Slowly Rand stretched to his full height, facing the doctor.

"I'm pardoned?" he queried, huskily. "Yes, I must be pardoned or they wouldn't give me these clothes."

The physician nodded. "Yes, you were pardoned today."

He sank back on the bed, astounded at his own sudden weakness. Perhaps he was not so strong as he felt at first, but free. That was joy enough to kill a strong man.

A trusty helped him get into his garments. This was a rather unusual procedure. Generally a discharged prisoner had to go to the clothing room and be fitted out with any old hand-me-down outfit that could be gathered together. That was Babe's work. She had greased the ways with twenty-dollar bills, no doubt, and her own money too. She would do that.

"Only yesterday, Doc," he exulted, "they were trying to kill me!"

"Yesterday," ejaculated the physician. "Eight days ago that was. You have been here eight days delirious from those blows on your head. The echoes of your fight still are being heard in the newspapers. There was never anything like it."

"Eight days," Rand repeated, as he slipped into his shoes.

ALL sullenness had vanished from his manner, to be replaced by an intense curiosity about the life that surged around him. As he walked across the prison yard beside the physician, he was conscious that guards and inmates were staring at him, and when they entered the office of the property clerk, the curly-haired trusty on duty smiled his admiration.

"You should go after the heavyweight title," he asserted, as he handed Lucky Jim the envelope that contained his pardon. "You sure can take punishment."

Rand shook hands with the clerk and turned away. Just outside the door he came face to face with the captain of the yard, the short hard-eyed man whom he had fought so strenuously.

"Come into my office," ordered the captain shortly.

Jim bade the physician good-by and then followed with some trepidation. There had been something menacing in the officer's manner. As he stooped to pass through the door and stood blinking his eyes to become accustomed to the change from sunlight to dusk, he heard a choking cry and a human body hit him.

"Oh, Jim," cried Babe's voice. "It's all over. We beat the rope. We beat it."

With a convulsive movement he caught her to him and just held her there tightly, wordless, racked by stranger emotions than he had ever experienced before.

"You're a game little kid," he murmured finally. "You're a real pal. I like you. I—I want you." He found it difficult even now to be sentimental.

Babe shivered ecstatically.

"You've always had me, Jim," she said gravely. "You're the only one. You know that."

A fear smote him.

"But Ashford?" he queried, gazing down at her with a flash of compassion. "You went to that leper——?"

She drew back from him with a tinkling, tantalizing laugh. She was her old self again now that the danger was past.

"I sprung that to make you mad," she said. "To make you fight. I went to Gentleman Joe direct."

"That hop peddler!" ejaculated Rand contemptuously. He had never become tolerant of those commercial ghouls, the purveyors of dope. "But Joe is as bad as Ashford," he added, with a glint of suspicion in his eye. "Why did he——?"

"Gentleman Joe is my brother," Babe interrupted him coolly. "He took me to a snowbird that was dying." She halted and gazed at him out of wide-open eyes, the lid of only one flickering significantly. "And what do you think?" she demanded. "The fellow confessed on his deathbed to killing Tony Capelli. At the last minute we got witnesses, the district attorney, the judge, and they wired the Governor. Wasn't that lucky?" she asked naïvely.

Rand grinned at her admiringly and squeezed her two hands in his big one until she cried out.

"The next guy that says *luck* to me is gonna get popped in the jaw," he asserted. "If it wasn't for you, I'd be dead."

For several seconds neither spoke. The captain, at his desk, had turned his back on them and was looking out of the window. Through the door they could see the guards and trusties moving leisurely about, carrying out the routine of penitentiary life. Far off on the bay sounded the sonorous note of a foghorn. To Jim every sound and every movement was a thing of beauty, a symbol of freedom, a glorious expression of life.

"Let's you and me try shooting square, Babe," he suggested.

The dance-hall girl pulled her hands free and stepped back to look up into his face sharply.

"You need a rest, Jim," she asserted anxiously. "We've always been on the up and up. Whaddye mean shoot square? Ain't you always give the gang a square deal? Why, you never welched on a pal in your life."

Rand smiled at her simplicity.

"But there's something bigger than the gang," he said slowly. "Something better than just being square to a pal. I've had plenty of time to do some thinking, Babe, and I'll bet you can't guess what I thought about."

"M o n e y," t h e g i r l responded promptly. "That's all you ever think about, Jim. Loot. You don't even forget it long enough to give me a tumble now and then."

"Well, yes, money," he admitted. "When I was shaking hands with death, Babe, I got to thinking of the two hundred thousand dollars Old Tan promised me. And you know, it didn't seem like much."

"Not enough?" suggested Babe. "You got bigger ideas?"

"No, not enough," he admitted, with just the hint of a smile. "Not enough to sell out."

They were in a far corner of the room now, where no one could hear them. Babe studied his face anxiously.

"But that ain't no sell-out, Jim," she protested earnestly. "Tannerly's a regular fellow. You're not selling out."

Lucky Jim shook his head slowly.

"I've been through all that up there," he retorted, with a twist of his thumb in the direction of the execution room. "I *am* selling out. When I take the jack on that deal, I'm selling out society, the saps. I'm doing dirt to a bigger gang than the regulars. Funny we never thought of that before."

Babe took his arm with a business-like grip.

"Lead me out of here," she requested loudly, addressing the captain. And to Rand as they moved through the door: "This place has got your goat. What you need is a drink and a night's sleep."

He followed obediently, with a quizzical glance at her. They were at another door now, a big steel slab with a tiny window in it through which eyes peered at them.

"Tannerly double-crossed me and the third ward bunch quit," he said. "Why? Simply because they're after the same thing I was—money. You was the only one who stood by? Why? Because you was the only one that wasn't after money. What does that prove? Why, money ain't the whole cheese after all. In fact when a man's about to die, it's so much dirt."

THE big iron slab swung open and they entered a great metal antechamber. At the far end of this room was a grated gate through which the outside light shone feebly. Just beyond that lay freedom, a precious, precious thing.

Babe glanced up at him with a serious, puzzled look.

"D'ye begin to get me, Babe?" he demanded. "Well, maybe this will get across." Catching her arm, he halted her there midway on their road to freedom and gazed at her earnestly. "My first square trick will be to get a wedding license for you and me."

Babe's eyes widened and her face went white.

"Oh!" she cried, swaying toward him."

"Out this way," called the guard,

gruffly, as the man at the outer grating swung open the gate.

Together they hurried through it, oblivious to everything around them. The friendly banter of the gateman fell upon unhearing ears. Jim did not even see the guard's extended hand. His eyes were fixed on the far world beyond.

The gate closed. He was outside the walls. Before him spread the outer grounds with its gardens, pretty buildings and rocky shore, sloping down to the salt water of the bay. To the left were the low-lying hills, the summits crowned here and there by box-like sentry houses, the terraced sides occupied by homes. Above was the sky, clear, cloudless.

Overcome by all this beauty, he turned to look behind him. And there gaped the cavernous steel barred entrance of a tomb of death.

As he shrank back a hand fell on his shoulder. It was Tannerly, tall, slender, gray-mustached, smiling.

"Old Jim Rand," he exclaimed fervently. "Lucky Jim——"

Rand whirled on him fiercely. One big hand caught and crushed the front of Tannerly's coat and shirt. A heavy fist lifted slowly from his side.

"Luck—hell!" he snapped. "They ain't no such thing."

The heavy fist fell and Tannerly dropped in a leaden heap.

Babe McMahon pushed Rand into a taxicab and slid into his lap.

"I'm all for the saps if you are," she asserted, catching his face between her two hands and gazing at him fixedly. "But I've gotta admit it gimme a pain to see you slam two hundred thousand berries on the button just now."

Spectre Dogs

The most authentic and recent manifestation of a spectral canine is that of the black spaniel of Ballechin House in Scotland. This house had been the property of Major Stuart from 1834 and also his residence till his death in 1876. He believed in spirits and frequently announced his intention of returning after death, preferably embodied in the person of a favorite black spaniel.

So impressed were the Major's relatives that they saw to it that all the dogs of the house were shot after his death.

The house was rented each fall for the shooting, but several lessees forfeited the rent they had paid, and left. They swore to noises and that a black Spaniel annoyed them, pulling the clothes from the beds and other uncanny tricks.

The late Marquis of Bute then hired the house, and assembled thirty-seven house guests, thirty-five of whom did not know the reputation of the house. Loud thuds in the corridors, the shuffling of feet, the disputes of people who could not be discovered, and knockings at bedroom doors, together with unaccountable doggy odors and other mysterious sensations were observed by the guests.

Some of them suggested there was a practical joker in their midst, but as one of the investigators remarked, a joke of this kind which had persisted for over a quarter of a century, would itself be a psychological phenomenon worthy of investigation. The Society for Psychical Research owned itself unable to offer any explanation.

And The Fat Was In The Fire

By DALE COLLINS

The third of a series of short stories retailing the startling adventures of PETER LAMB.

"MY DEAR Lamb," said the affable William Williams, "you may be an artist, but a fool could see that there would have been a good niche for you in the business world."

He looked quite serious, and his appraising eyes considered little Mr. Lamb while he spoke. It would have been hard to say, however, on what his judgment was based, for Mr. Lamb looked the most innocent and guileless of men in his immaculate whites and large topee, his sun-umbrella clutched in a small hand and his mild blue eyes peering through his pince-nez.

"Not at all! Not at all!" Mr. Lamb answered modestly, but he was human. To flatter an honest man call him a cute rogue; to flatter a rogue call him an honest man. Obviously it was a pleasant sensation for Mr. Lamb to hear this statement from the large and prosperous William Williams, who was managing director of a great firm of drug manufacturers. The compliment was one which had never been paid to Mr. Lamb before.

"I know what I'm talking about," Williams declared in his masterful way.

The launch reached the jetty, and Mr. Lamb and his friend stepped ashore. They were fellow-voyagers on the big Dutch packet lying out in the roads, and, on Mr. Williams' suggestion, were to spend their two days together at Suralengleng, that quaint Dutch Indian outpost, sightseeing.

Unlike Mr. Lamb, who was a mere tourist, Williams was combining work with play in his travels, but, as he had explained, there would be ample time for amusement when his calls were out of the way.

Mr. Lamb was completely dwarfed by his companion. He seemed no more than the shadow of the big commercial magnate, and clung as closely to him.

"I always feel," he confessed, "somewhat lost among all this jostling life of the crowded East. It is very good of you to ask me to accompany you. I appreciate the courtesy. I'm afraid I make a poor Ulysses."

"I don't know what a 'Ulysses' is," William Williams confessed in his breezy way, "but I'm pleased as could be to have you with me."

"Very good of you! Very good!" Mr. Lamb affirmed again, and edged closer to his friend while a crowd of coolies swarmed past.

Williams hailed a car. He did it impressively, as was his habit in all things. He was one of those men who look as solid and businesslike as a

mahogany roll-topped desk. Mr. Lamb crept in beside him, and they were whirled away through the congested street, the horn sounding continuously, pedestrians jabbering and scattering, and native policemen twiddling batons in an unconvincing pretence at directing the traffic. Mr. Lamb seemed rather nervous, but Williams lit a large cigar and lolled back, the very model of a managing director.

"These native drivers are too slow," he remarked, but with easy tolerance becoming to a prosperous and contented man.

They went to the best hotel, where Mr. Lamb decided he would wait until his friend was free from his duties.

There was a pleasant, wide veranda, stone-floored and cool, from whence he could watch the eternal kaleidoscope of the Orient in peace and security. Williams thought the decision a wise one, and seemed relieved that his companion did not intend to wander Suralengleng unescorted.

"I have only three firms to see and shouldn't be away more than two hours," he said. "You'll be all right here?"

"Perfectly!" sighed little Mr. Lamb contentedly, his eyes, round and dreamy like those of a child, turning to the busy roadway where there was so much that was romantic, colorful and strange to him.

His friend smiled kindly at such ingenious enthusiasm and left him. Little Mr. Lamb remained engrossed. Time passed, but the pageant lost none of its interest for him; in fact, his attention was so centred upon it that he was startled when a voice bade him good morning. Looking up hastily, he found a stranger by his side.

"You'll excuse me speaking to you, perhaps," said the unknown, "but you seem to like Suralengleng. I wonder would you like it if you lived here?"

He subsided a little wearily in a nearby chair. He was long and thin, grave and gray, and he bore the stamp of disillusion and disappointment. His clothes were neat, but much worn, and his brown face held many lines. Mr. Lamb's eyes expressed the sympathy so readily awakened in his heart. He saw before him, and plainly not without some excitement, one of the tragedies of the East, one of the men of the West who had come to conquer, but had been conquered, one of the broken men.

"I wonder," said little Mr. Lamb gently.

The stranger sat looking out even as the visitor had sat, but there was a wry and grim smile on his lips.

"I've lived here twenty years," said he at last. "I know. But I'd better introduce myself. I'm Edward Harper —or that's my name now. I used to be a doctor of medicine, once!"

Mr. Lamb was no actor. He could not conceal his sympathetic understanding and the interest he felt in this Edward Harper who had been known by another name and had been a professional man, once. He did his best, however, and introduced himself with those stock-phrases which are so useful in awkward moments.

THEY talked then. Mr. Lamb was pleased to feel that they were talking together as men do in the strange corners of the world. Also, for all his simplicity, he knew he was looking into a soul—into a wounded, seared soul. The man hated the East, hated Suralengleng, and was down and out, but there was no escape for him. He was Fate's plaything.

He did not repine, for that was useless, but he stated the fact, and with the encouragement of such a friendly listener told things which, as he himself admitted, were hidden usually from the world.

"It does a man good to let himself go sometimes, when he gets the chance," he said, and in his tone was all the wistfulness of one whose opportunities to speak of his misfortunes were few and far between.

The chat lengthened, and presently the enthralled little Mr. Lamb was listening to an extraordinary story of the unkindness of Chance. There sat Edward Harper, a man without a cent, and in his pocket was a secret worth untold wealth.

"Watch the native women for a while," he said. "Tell me if you see a fat one!"

Mr. Lamb was puzzled, but obeyed. The Malay girls of Suralengleng had claims to be observed. Mr. Lamb discovered that they were small and neat, slim as reeds, graceful as gazelles. He found none of them fat, and admitted as much.

"You'll never see one with an ounce of superfluous flesh," came the answer. "That's the point of my story. They're not fat because they've a remedy to melt the too, too solid flesh. The prescription for that remedy is in my pocket!"

He tapped his worn white coat as he spoke, and he looked at Mr. Lamb with sad gray eyes. For the moment all that this announcement meant was not clear to the listener, but gradually understanding came, and with it, masked as well as those open features would allow, came envy and cupidity.

"A real cure—a genuine cure?" cried little Mr. Lamb.

"Absolutely, and there's a fortune in it if I could only realize on it. I came on it by the only stroke of luck I've had since I can remember, and now, just in the way things go with me, I can't make any real use of it.

"As I say, I was a doctor once. Well, what I've left of my skill earned me this secret. When Spanish influenza swept through this island last year I saved a high-caste Malay's family by my nursing. I could not save the father. He was too old to rally. But in gratitude for what I had done for his children he gave me on his deathbed the prescription for this secret drug.

"He drew a faded paper from his pocket. "I have it all written down so that any chemist could make it up, but because I'm penniless and stuck in this hole it remains unexploited."

"Dear me, what a shame!" sighed little Mr. Lamb.

"It is," said Harper, wretchedly. "And as things are I'd part with it for five hundred dollars, and be glad to do so, legally assign all my rights and everything!"

"Five hundred dollars?"

"I'd sell my fortune for five hundred dollars in ready cash!"

"Dear me!" Mr. Lamb repeated, and relapsed into another silence which an artful man would have contrived to make one of sympathy. Mr. Lamb was not artful. If Harper had not been brooding in his thoughts he must have seen reflections of baser considerations which were passing across his hearer's mind.

"After all," Mr. Lamb was musing, "as Williams says, I'm really a business man, and business is business." And from these meditations and the recollecting of his friend, a plan arose by which *loss* was impossible and a *profit* highly probable.

"Look here, Mr. Harper," he said in due time, "I'm genuinely touched by your story. I'm a business man and something of a gambler. I must think this thing over, but if you feel inclined to be here at two this afternoon with a proper form of agreement drawn up, I might consider giving you your price for this prescription. Mind you, everything must be in order." He gave Harper a shrewd glance which warned him to be careful.

"*You?*" gasped Harper, astounded.

"I mean it. But I'm afraid you must leave me now. I have an appointment. Meet me again this afternoon!"

Mr. Lamb waved his hand to emphasize that the interview was over and he spoke decisively, but he could not keep the flush of excitement from his cheeks. If Williams returned and discovered him talking with Harper the scheme would be ruined. He betrayed his anxiety. Harper, however, was only anxious to please his patron. Mr. Lamb was left alone, slightly intoxicated by his success and the enterprise upon which he was embarked.

HIS small friend's story, delivered with such elaborate nonchalance, had changed William Williams. Nothing of the masterful managing director remained; he was like a gleeful schoolboy.

"The Malays secret remedy for adipose tissue!" he repeated again. "Man alive, you don't know what it means. It's one of the most sought after things in all chemistry. Commercial science has been on its trail for years, but we could never succeed in solving the riddle. Only a few Malays know the secret, and they are all high caste. No bribe could move them. They would not breathe a word. It is against their religious principles to even speak of the matter with a foreigner. And here you've stumbled on it, you lucky devil!"

Mr. Lamb, watching closely, saw that alert brain summing up the situation, and was on guard.

"Look here," said Williams sharply, "I must meet this man whoever he is. I want that prescription!"

Though the rôle was unfamiliar to him, Mr. Lamb was proving an apt pupil in the world of business. He had expected this suggestion, and he shook his head and answered firmly.

"I'm afraid that's impossible!"

Williams was indignant and filled with consternation. He spoke heatedly and at length, and finding he made no progress that way began to wheedle and cajole. Mr. Lamb met every attack with unshaken determination.

"But the thing's no use to you," urged Williams.

"It might be, and, what's more important, it's of use to *you!*"

Williams considered Mr. Lamb in grudging admiration.

"I didn't think," he said bitterly, you'd be demonstrating so soon the truth of my judgment!"

"That's just what I am doing," little Mr. Lamb retorted brazenly. "The good fortune came to me, and I'm going to profit by it. I'm gambling on it. You must take a risk, too. Are you prepared to bet a thousand on it, and put the money down?"

Mr. Lamb was prepared for bargaining and haggling, but Williams, apparently, recognized the real value of the find, and was accustomed to dealing in large sums of money.

"Done!" he agreed. "I'll take the risk. I'll bet that amount for the chance to win a fortune any day. Come with me to the bank, and I'll draw the money. I'm trusting you, but I feel I can do that, even if you drive a hard bargain.

"Business is business," little Mr. Lamb pointed out, and behind his high forehead his mind was very busy.

HAVING escaped, by cunning, from Williams, little Mr. Lamb returned to the hotel to keep his rendezvous. He had considered the whole position very carefully, and awaited the course of events with equanimity.

A smile of relief wreathed his face when he found Harper waiting for him, but Harper greeted him strangely and looked more moody than ever.

"Well, I'm prepared to go on with our deal," said Mr. Lamb cheerfully. "I've brought the cash." He took out the portion of Williams's notes needed, and brandished them before the vendor. "There's your five hundred!"

Harper, however, looked glum and fidgeted.

"What's the matter?" Mr. Lamb demanded anxiously.

For a time the question went unanswered, and then Harper explained.

"I was desperate this morning when I made that offer," he declared. "It was madness. I've decided not to go on with it at the present price!"

He went on explaining and emphasizing his point of view, but Mr. Lamb was not listening. He was weighing the situation. He could not afford to take the risk of being left without the prescription, but he would not forego all his profit.

"Listen, Harper," he said shortly. "I'm not going to bargain with you, but I want to be fair with you. I'll give you another two-fifty. I'm not really keen about this deal, and I'm doing it as much to help you as anything. That's my last price. I can't improve on those terms. You must take it or leave it, and that's final!"

Mr. Lamb's face was set like a mask, and there was a ring in his voice. He was commanding success. Harper hesitated, studying Mr. Lamb What he saw convinced him that it was idle to strive for more.

"You've got me," he confessed. "I want the money, and I recognize you're a business man and can't be bluffed." Mr. Lamb looked modest.

"I'll accept the offer, though it's against all reason. Here's the prescription, and here's the agreement I've had drawn up by a lawyer." For a flash he looked anxious.

"Perhaps before you sign it you'd care to have it looked over by a solicitor as a matter of form?"

Mr. Lamb's caution had been swept away.

"No, no," he said airily. "We business men have a sufficient smattering of the law. I'll just glance through it and make sure all's in order."

The agreement left nothing to be desired, and the deal was concluded. Harper departed with his money, and little Mr. Lamb remained to draw up an agreement with Williams based on the one he possessed.

He was well content. A small profit and a quick turnover without risk was, he decided, the soundest policy in this easy sport called business.

TO LITTLE Mr. Lamb six hours later came the miserable Harper, hot with haste and beside himself with excitement. Mr. Lamb, happy after his day's labor, had been resting in the lounge of the hotel, Williams having returned to the ship to write to his firm about the great discovery.

Harper entered in a rush.

"Why, what's the trouble?" asked Mr. Lamb. For a second Harper could not recover his breath sufficiently to speak. His agitation was so great that, having wiped his brow, he proceeded to pluck his ancient handkerchief into strips with his nervous fingers.

"My dear fellow——?"

"I want that prescription back," the other burst out. "I must have it back—I insist on having it back!"

His excitement warned Mr. Lamb that circumspection would be wise.

"I'm afraid that's impossible," came the calm reply. "I have already resold."

"You've sold——?" panted Harper, and burst into a flood of savage oaths, cursing his luck, himself and Fate, with an occasional passing reference to Mr. Lamb and his bitter grief that he had ever set eyes upon him. Mr. Lamb listened, shocked and pained.

Having sworn himself out, the man collapsed into a chair with all the spirit beaten out of him. He was like one sentenced to death. Mr. Lamb had to steel his heart, lest sympathy should get the better of shrewdness.

"And now perhaps," he said, "you'll tell me what all this is about?"

"About? About?" Harper moaned. "Oh, yes, I'll tell you what it's about. It's about the unluckiest man alive, Edward Harper. It couldn't have happened to anybody else; it simply couldn't. What a fool I am! what a poor cursed fool!"

"I am sorry to see you so distressed," Mr. Lamb remarked, "but I remain in the dark."

"Listen!" said Harper fiercely. "All these months I've been trying to make some use of that prescription, and I've failed. Today, in despair, I sell it to you for a song. In a matter of hours I get this cable from Buckram's——

"Buckram's——?"

"The pill people. I've been trying to get them interested for a long time, and had given up hope. Now they offer me a cash payment of $25,000 and a royalty. I'd be a millionaire!"

He thrust the pink slip of paper to Mr. Lamb, and burying his head in his hands, wept. It is a terrible sight to see a man in tears, but this new and hardened Mr. Lamb paid no attention. He was staring at the paper with greedy eyes, and realizing that Harper was not alone in misfortune. The figures fascinated him, but they could not blind his eyes.

"Where's this come from?" he asked.

"England, of course!"

"But this is only a telegram from Batavia?"

"That's the system here. Cables from abroad are relayed on here as telegrams."

"I see," said Mr. Lamb, and thought hard even as Harper had thought.

"I must get it back!"

"Yes," agreed Mr. Lamb decisively, "that's the thing to do. We'll get it back. We'll buy it back!"

"We?"

Mr. Lamb laughed briefly.

"You don't think I'm going to be left out of this, surely?" he countered, and Harper, at last, was forced to admit that Mr. Lamb had a right to come into the good thing.

"Half-shares!" he insisted, and so it was agreed.

"It's worth any money," Harper pointed out. "But for heaven's sake don't give the holder a hint of that, or he'll ask something fabulous!"

"You can leave that to me," said Mr. Lamb. "Meet me here at ten in the morning."

AT THE appointed hour Mr. Lamb appeared to gladden the eyes of Harper, who was distraught from the strain of his vigil. Mr. Lamb, also, was showing signs of stress.

"Is it all right?" Harper's cry was fraught with apprehension.

"I'm getting it, at a price," said Mr. Lamb, and his voice was weary. "It's been an awful job. You see my man's in the drug trade, and knows the value of this thing. We've been tussling for hours, but I've got him around at last. He'll sell it back to me, but he wants five thousand for it!"

For a second Harper was shocked by the rapid jump in value, but consideration comforted him.

"Nothing matters as long as we get it back," he said. "With this," he waved the telegram, "I can get any money I want. I could raise the whole lot. I suppose you insist on coming in?" He looked at Mr. Lamb with the hope that springs eternal.

"Certainly," said Mr. Lamb firmly. "The bet has become a sure thing.

I'll get the twenty-five hundred on my letter of credit. Are you sure you can raise your half?"

"Positive!" said Harper. "Oh, thank God, we've pulled it out of the fire!"

EDWARD Harper when he had raised and paid over his share of the $5,000, knew quite well that he could trust little Mr. Lamb, but he accompanied his friend to the dock, saw him into the launch, and heard him give instructions to the boatman to take him to the Dutch packet.

"I'll see you in an hour then," said Harper. "Good luck!"

"Where would we be without luck?" chuckled little Mr. Lamb gaily.

"Ah, where?" said Harper, and proceeded to vanish, because he knew that Williams was waiting on the steamer, and he had no desire to see Mr. Lamb again.

The launch chugged away across the crowded harbor, but it never reached the Dutch packet. Its owner, greatly enriched, proceeded to vanish, also, as requested, and Mr. Lamb, hidden in the chain-locker of a tramp-steamer bound for Shanghai, made entries in his little black book which were far from neat, because there was scant light, but they were quite attractive. On the debit side were trifling bribes to the boatman and to several sailors on the tramp, and the credit column held an entry for $2,750.

"They worked it out quite neatly," between them," he murmured thoughtfully, "but the trouble with these criminals is that they are so clever. A simple soul can often pick up a few crumbs." He sighed and tapped with the pencil. "Still, it was a good prescription for removing superfluous—cash!"

The fourth story of this series, "A Slight Misapprehension," will appear in our next issue, out April 1.

Shipboard Hoodoos

Certain animals when on shipboard were believed to attract storms. Chief amongst them was the cat. She carried a gale in her tail and when she licked her fur the wrong way she was doing her best to bring a storm.

If puss scratched the mast the ship was bound to go down with all hands; while a cat aboard a ship which was becalmed was as good as doomed to death at the hands of some member of the crew. When the body of the cat vanished overboard the wind would return. On the other hand disaster might overtake the cat murderer.

Sailor's wives often kept a black cat. If it was treated kindly, Jack at sea was safe from harm.

It was considered unlucky to have a parson aboard ship. Another bad "passenger" was a corpse. If any of the crew or passengers died, they must be consigned to the deep at once. Even mummies aboard were bound to cause the loss of a mast or gear, if not complete shipwreck. Also the effects of a suicide had to be thrown overboard, and not, as was usual on the death of one of the crew, divided up in the forecastle.

Some sailors would as soon carry the devil as a lawyer.

The Lost Canteen

By LEMUEL DE BRA

IT CAME to Bob Gearhart gradually that at last Fate had stacked the cards against him; that he was face to face with inescapable death. A fatalist—as most gamblers are—this conviction that he was beholding his last sun grew upon him.

Not as one who weakly succumbs to failure, but as one who without cavil plays the cards dealt him, Gearhart admitted that the desert with its trackless wastes and mocking heat mirages had tricked him.

Now, lost for two days, his food gone, his canteen empty, his throat and tongue parched with torturing thirst, his whole body racked with pain and rebelling at the unaccustomed hardship, he calmly abandoned hope.

And it was like Gearhart that he looked into the face of Death just as he had looked at Life. There was the same disdainful smile on his haughty countenance, the same glint of amused contempt in his dark eyes.

Looking at the man as he sat in the scant shade of an upthrust of rock, calmly surveying the bleak vista of glaring sand and alkali that had beaten him and now defied him, one would have said that Bob Gearhart, gentleman and gambler, was mildly curious about it all, but indifferent; that he was interested in the game and would play it out, but that he was absolutely unafraid, serenely unmoved by the darkening shadow of defeat.

"Damned annoying," he muttered calmly through cracking lips. "What have I ever done that I [illegible] to be deprived of the satisfaction of cashing in between clean sheets? Wonder what I'll do my last hour? Some men go crazy, throw away their clothes, tear their hair. Lord, spare me making a muss of myself like that! I'm a sight now, with no shave for three days. Let me play my last card, as I have always played it!"

The sun, burning like a flame on the back of his hand, warned him that he had to move farther around the rock; that the shade had moved on and left him. He had just settled down again when a sound struck his ears. It was a harsh sound that for hours had ground at his eardrums, ceasing only with the last few minutes of wretched sleep.

It was the slow, monotonous *crunch, crunch* of lagging steps in loose sand. It came from around the rock, on Gearhart's left; and as he turned his head, a dust-caked, sun-scorched figure of a man stumbled into view. At sight of Gearhart he stopped short, swaying on trembling limbs. His right hand fumbled at the butt of a holstered pistol.

"Don't bother," spoke Gearhart, contempt in his eyes. "I threw my gun away this morning. Everything I had of value went with the burro when he bolted. I haven't even a drink of water that you could steal. Come and——" He broke off with a queer swallowing sound and bent a searching gaze on the newcomer's face. "Well! Damn me if it isn't Sneak Morton!"

Sneak Morton's weazel body squirmed a step closer. His rat eyes,

staring out of a smudge of dust and stubble, flamed suddenly with displeased recognition.

"Gearhart! *Gearhart!* What in the name of the devil are you doing here? And—and you're out of water?"

Gearheart nodded.

"Out of water, out of food, and hopelessly lost. I perceive that you serve merely to emphasize my unpleasant situation. Unless" — he looked up without any show of interest—"unless you happen to know how we can get out of this."

Sneak Morton shook his unkempt head.

"Lost myself," he croaked as he slumped down in the hot shade near Gearhart. "Nothing to eat since yesterday evening. No water for three hours or more. Been walking, walking, walking. Damn the cursed sand! Damn the cursed heat! Damn——"

He broke suddenly into shrill incoherent curses, beating his knees with clenched fists, his grimy face twisted with a spasm of dry, whimpering sobs.

Gearhart, frowning, eyed the man as one would some curious and repulsive animal.

"I wonder," he said slowly, "just why I had to draw you to my hand? What I had was bad enough. The surroundings, particularly, weren't to my taste. I could suggest several improvements in scenery and equipment. A bath and clean clothes, for instance. Something to shut out the sun-glare. A toothbrush. An electric fan. Yes, many things. But—the company was quite satisfactory.'

SNEAK Morton flashed him a look of deadly hatred.

"Stuck on yourself as usual, eh? Damn little I care whether or not you like my company. And that's a hell of a thing for you to talk about with both of us lost and out of water and—don't you realize that—that we're going to die out here in this hell?"

"I realize that quite clearly," replied Gearhart. "That's why I'm so outspoken, so particular in my choice of company. It's curious, in a way. I'm probably just as dirty with the grime of this desert as you are; but until you came along I didn't *feel* dirty. You always affect me that way. Queer, isn't it?"

Sneak Morton snarled something, but Gearhart did not appear to hear him. Several minutes passed before he spoke again.

"Morton, I trust you will pardon a mild curiosity. You don't belong in this desert any more than I do. I can think of you only in connection with lights, green tables, tobacco smoke, and the click of chips in Bull Mahoney's palace of chance.

"With all due respect to our chosen profession, I always think of you as being all that decent men mean when they say out of the corner of their mouths—'professional gambler.' So I'm wondering how you come to be out here. Is it possible that the good citizens of Silver Ridge honored you as they did me, with a request to leave?"

"They run me out, damn 'em!" Sneak Morton growled thickly. "Said I was crooked!"

Gearhart smiled.

"You're trying to say you weren't any more crooked than I," he said with no show of resentment. "I object only to your choice of words. I have never been crooked. On several occasions—you have good reason to remember one of them—I have beaten crooks like you, at their own crooked game. You understand me, don't you?"

"What if I don't?" snapped Morton.

"I think you do. You know," he went on, musingly, "I have never been able to grasp the psychology of the player who pulls a gun and shoots the [illegible] he has caught cheating.

What possible satisfaction can there be in anything so—so crude? How much better to play the game as you find it! Poker, to me, is a game of wits and nerve. It doesn't matter to me whether my opponent plays straight or crooked. I'll match my wits and my nerve against him—play for play—and beat him."

"You can do it, I'll tell the weeping world!" grumbled Sneak with grudging admiration. "Say, where did you start for when—when you left Silver Ridge?"

Gearhart smiled.

"To be exactly truthful, I didn't start. I was *started*. Strange how thoughtlessly discourteous a band of self-appointed uplifters can be! Reminds me of Bret Harte's famous story. You remember it, of course."

"Me? I never read."

"Ah! Quite so! And unfortunate, for you. Reading maketh the full man, whether he be ditch-digger, parson or gambler. You should study history, the story of mankind; read a little of the best fiction, the Bible, science, biology, psychology. They'll broaden your outlook, give you a better understanding of your fellow-man and make you more successful in our chosen profession." Sneak Morton muttered something, but it was unintelligible.

Of a sudden he struggled to his feet. "For God's sake, let's do something besides talk!" he cried savagely. "I'm suffering the tortures of ten thousand hells right now. I—I can't die here!"

Slowly, Gearhart arose, towering above the other man.

"I dislike the physical exertion of walking," he said resignedly. "Especially when it seems so utterly useless. For our chance of getting out alive I wouldn't give the day's dust on a white chip. But—neither am I going to throw down my cards out of order."

He tightened his belt, straightened his broad-brimmed hat, and looked around over the broiling waste of sand and alkali sinks.

"Let us compare notes, Morton, and see if we draw anything. Just how did you become lost? Where were you? Where were you going? How long was it?"

Sneak Morton spat disgustedly.

"They started me down the railroad. I was going to walk to Bitter Springs. They gave me enough grub and water for the trip. But it was so damned hot on the railroad. I thought I saw a chance to shorten the distance by cutting across the desert where I knew the road swung in a broad curve. Expected to strike the road again in about two hours. That," he finished with bitter emphasis, "was day before yesterday."

Gearhart nodded.

"An old story on the desert. As lacking in novelty as my own. The delegation that waited on me kindly permitted me to choose my destination. The new camp over on Coyote Creek appealed to me, but the good citizens couldn't think of permitting me to wait for the stage. They provided me with a burro, supplies, water, and started me on the trail.

"In the ordinary course of events I should have reached Coyote Creek yesterday afternoon, but the burro took a dislike to me from the start and bolted at the first chance. Since he took all of my food and most of my water, I tried to catch him. I not only lost him, but became hopelessly lost myself. Since then I've been walking, and walking, but getting nowhere. This morning the sun rose in the west. Tonight it's setting in the north. Annoying, isn't it?"

"I'm thirsty — damned thirsty!" moaned Sneak Morton.

"Quite so. I can think of nothing but water myself; bubbling springs of cool water; long, icy drinks like

they set up at Mahoney's; cold bottles of——"

"Shut up!" shrieked Morton in sudden frenzy. "Shut up or I'll put a bullet through you!"

"If you eventually decide to do that," said Gearhart indifferently, "please do me the favor to bury me. I hate to think of lying out here in the glare of the sun all day and with lizards crawling over me at night. Well, let's go. Shortly before you came I was thinking of putting my back to the sun and walking straight east. Tonight, with the help of the full moon, I was going to keep going—east. Somewhere in the east, by the way, is that railroad you lost. It may be twenty miles, and it may be a hundred. I don't know as it matters a lot."

THEY struck out, Gearhart instinctively taking the lead, Sneak Morton without question trailing behind.

For almost a mile neither man spoke. The struggle of ploughing the fine, loose sand, stumbling into and out of rock-strewn gullies, and over wind-tossed dunes, with the scorching sun striking at their backs and the smothering heat-waves beating at their faces, was enough to discourage even the desert-bred. For men, soft with the life of the gaming tables, it was torture.

Every now and then they came to an upthrust of rock so much like the one from which they had started that it gave them the depressing sensation of having made no progress. The unchanged face of the desert added to that feeling. There was still the bleak and barren vista of yellow sand, white alkali flats, and dead gray sagebrush reaching away on all sides to the quivering horizon of heat-waves.

Gearhart, struggling on like a sleepwalker, dead to the pain of it, dead to the torturing thirst, dead to everything except the will to *keep going*, realized suddenly that he no longer heard Sneak Morton's sullen cursing, the slow grind of his steps in the sand. Stopping, he looked back, flinching with the stabbing pain of the sun in his eyes.

Sneak Morton, some thirty yards back, was on his knees, swaying drunkenly, his hands clawing at his bared throat.

Unhurriedly, Gearhart ploughed back over his trail. Contempt in his eyes, he dragged Morton to his feet, shook him roughly.

"I didn't want to be bothered with you," he said evenly; "but now that you're here I can't see you act like a fool. Are you going to be bluffed by a——"

"I'm dying!" gasped Sneak Morton. "Water! Water! For God's sake——"

"You're not dying, and there isn't any water. Don't give in yet. Why, you're good for the rest of the day and half the night. About midnight I figured on burying you."

Morton looked up, saw the mockery in Gearhart's eyes, and winced.

"The desert," went on Gearhart calmly, "is a state of mind. I've known men to go a hundred miles forced march on no food and only a gallon of water. I've known others, just as strong physically, to start on a fifty-mile trip with plenty of food and water, and die of thirst. It depends mostly on whether you lose your head or keep it. Are you going to lose yours? Are you going to throw down your hand like a coward, or play it like a man?"

"I'll play it," whined Morton. "Go on."

They started on, walking side by side now. When Morton stumbled, Gearhart caught him quickly, gave him an encouraging shake, a cheerful word.

Their shadows before them had lengthened to queer grotesque shapes moving over the yellow sand when

they came suddenly to the edge of a deep wash. Here they stopped, while Gearhart looked around for the best place to get down the fifteen-foot slope.

"Look!" cried Gerhart, and pointed to the bottom of the dry wash.

Sneak Morton followed the pointing finger, and stiffened. With a throaty cry he stumbled down the bank and fell on his knees. "A canteen!" he croaked huskily. "A lost canteen! And it's full!"

Gearhart reached his side. "We'll split it," he said without excitement. "You first."

With an animal-like cry, Morton sprang away. The canteen grasped in his left hand, his revolver in the other, he faced Gearhart.

"Split it! Like hell we will! You don't like my company, you——"

Cursing, he backed away until he was some fifteen feet from Gearhart. Then he squatted on the sand, held the canteen between his knees and unscrewed the cap. His little eyes fastened on Gearhart, the revolver aimed at Gearhart's chest, Sneak Morton put the canteen to his lips and drank deep.

GEARHART had seemed to be more interested in Sneak Morton's actions than in the contents of the lost canteen; but at sight of the water spilling over Morton's swollen lips, he started forward eagerly, his parched tongue licking at his cracked mouth.

Morton sprang to his feet. "No you don't! Not a damn drop do you get! I got you now where I want you. Insult me—despise me—damn you! Now let me hear you beg—beg for water you won't get. You're going to die out here, Gearhart. Do you get that? You're going to die. And I, Sneak Morton, am going to get out. You don't like my company, so I'm going to let you die here alone. Serves you damn well right," he finished with a mirthless laugh and again raised the canteen to his lips.

With an obvious struggle, Morton quit just short of emptying the canteen. "Got to save a little," he cackled; "just a little." His gaze darted over the sand, then lifted to Gearhart's face. "Want a drink?"

Gearhart did not deign to reply.

Morton laughed queerly. "Gearhart, the angel from heaven who lost this canteen was going up this wash —north. He's got so much water he never bothered to come back after this canteen he lost. And he evidently knows where he's going. Well, I'm going to catch him.

"As for you," he flung out savagely, "you can go where you damn please, except that you're not going with me. Understand that? Make one move to follow me and I'll pump you so full of lead the coyotes won't be able to eat you. So long," he finished abruptly and started hurriedly up the wash.

"Queer," muttered Gearhart when Sneak Morton had vanished around a bend. "If he hadn't showed up, I might have found that canteen. And if I hadn't gone back and made that little whelp keep on his legs, he'd been back there dead, and I—— Well, it's a funny deal and I don't understand it."

He shook his head, and studied the sand a moment.

"I could follow him and get shot. That wouldn't matter if it wasn't so much like committing suicide. Guess I'll back-trail this chap who lost the canteen. Maybe he's going *into* the desert. That'd be a good joke on Sneak Morton! Yes, I think I'll back-trail him. At least there's water where he came from, or he wouldn't have it."

Gearhart turned down the wash—south. He had no difficulty following the trail, for the tracks kept to the center of the gully. As Gearhart studied them, a puzzled frown wrink-

led his forehead. Even to Gearhart, unused to trailing, those tracks told a plain story.

"In a bad way himself," Gearhart muttered. "Here he was running, here he fell, and there he was staggering all over the wash! I wonder——"

IT WAS about twenty minutes later that Gearhart realized suddenly that he was again out on the bare face of the desert. So closely had he studied the tracks in the sand that he had not observed the wash gradually flatten out and vanish. Now, as he paused to look around, he saw that the man he was back-trailing had come toward the wash from a jumble of rock on the desert floor ahead of him.

As Gearhart stumbled up to these rocks, something at the base of one brought him up short, an eager gasp on his lips. It was the sun glinting on a pool of water.

Although Gearhart had been expecting it, the sight of that water completely unnerved him. It was as though the will of the man that had held him up so long realized now that its task was finished. So the numbed legs collapsed, and with a hoarse cry, Gearhart fell on the sand and buried his face in the water.

One does not live in desert towns and mingle with men of the desert without absorbing a certain amount of desert wisdom. As Gearhart's burning lips touched the water, the only conscious thought in his throbbing brain was the agony of his thirst, the ineffable relief of the blessed moisture on his lips and swollen tongue. The warning that came to him was purely subconscious. With a superhuman effort he drew back and looked around.

Bare rocks; rocks mottled, corroded, green-stained; rocks and sand moist, but barren of a single growing thing; sand that showed not one mark of any animal coming to drink the copper-hued water.

There were marks and Gearhart, with leaping pulses, studied them. There the man he had back-trailed had knelt by the pool to drink; there he had lain down probably after drinking his fill, and there he had knelt again, filled his canteens, and struck out toward the dry wash.

Perfectly calm, in full control of himself again, Gearhart got to his feet and started back. "Poor fool!" he muttered. "Wonder who he was? Some tenderfoot, undoubtedly. Wonder how far he got? And Sneak Morton! He has about an hour's start. Wonder if I'll be too late——"

The sun was setting when Gearhart stumbled up to a figure huddled beneath a clump of grease-wood at one edge of the dry wash. He called, but Sneak Morton did not answer. Kneeling, Gearhart gently turned him over; and a cry of pity was wrung from his lips at sight of the agony on Sneak Morton's face, an agony that even Death had not effaced.

Gearhart picked up the canteen. Into the palm of one hand he poured a few drops of copper-hued water.

Ten minutes later, Gearhart stood on the bank of the wash. Hat in hand, he lifted his face to the glory of the desert sunset.

"It is written," he whispered through parched and bloated lips, "that Thy ways are past understanding. But, I believe I understand. A little sleep . . . at moonrise . . . on with the game! And I'm going to win! *I'm going to win!*"

The Most Mysterious Happening in My Life

As related by DAVID BELASCO
(The Wizard of the Drama)
to
BIDE DUDLEY

DAVID BELASCO, dean of the American theatrical producers, has been a busy man ever since he came to New York from the Far West years ago, to make this city the scene of his activities.

He has produced hundreds of plays and made dozens of stars. His motto always has been "Keep Busy and You'll Be Happy," and he has lived up to it faithfully. The very fact that he has known few idle moments has made him an extremely practical man. Being such, his life has had little room for mystery. Incidents he could not explain have bobbed up in his career, but he has paid scant attention to them.

"Life is full of mysteries if you care to look for them," said he recently, as I sat in his studio atop the Belasco Theatre. "But a busy man has little time for puzzles."

"But," I replied, "hasn't there been one mystery somewhere in your life that has interested you?"

Mr. Belasco's face lighted up with a glow of memory.

"There was, and is," he said. "I never tried very hard to solve it, despite the fact that, for a long time I was confronted with it, at intervals. Oh, there was nothing supernatural about it. In fact, I fear you will regard it as rather a commonplace mystery; yet it has made me do a great deal of wondering."

The noted stage genius settled back in his chair and I felt a very interesting story was just ahead.

"Seven years ago," he began, "a young man—I'd say he was about twenty-five years of age—came to my office with a play he had written. He managed to get clear up here without being stopped. Where the office boy was, I don't know. At any rate, the visitor reached my door and knocked. Thinking it was someone associated with me, I turned back the lock and he entered. He was faultlessly dressed, polite and smiling.

" 'I beg your pardon, Mr. Belasco,' he said, 'but I am Isaac Carter and I have a play here I'd like to submit to you.'

" 'Won't you please hand it to my director on the floor below?' I asked. 'If he thinks it worthy, he will send it to me and I will read it.'

" 'That's the system I want to avoid,' he replied. 'Plays pile up so rapidly in the offices of subordinates

that I feared mine would get at the bottom of a stack and stay there a year or so. I want action on it from you personally. In other words,' he added with a smile, 'I want my electricity direct from the battery.'

"His manner was ingratiating, and I asked him to be seated. He handed me the play. It bore the title of *The Mountain's Top,* or something like that, and on the front cover was 'By Isaac Carter.' Before looking inside, I thought I'd question my visitor a bit.

" 'Mr. Carter,' I asked, 'are you a resident of New York?'

" 'Born and brought up here,' he replied.

" 'From what Carter family do you come?'

"He laughed lightly. 'None,' he said. 'To be perfectly frank with you, my name isn't Isaac Carter at all. That is merely my pen name, assumed for the purpose of writing this play—and possibly others.'

" 'Well, may I ask what your real name is?'

"He shook his head. 'That is my one and only secret,' he said. 'My mother is old and very straight-laced. She has some queer notions and one of them is that we should avoid bringing notoriety to the family. She made me promise never to use my own name, or even tell it, in connection with my efforts to write for the stage.

" 'She considers anything that has to do with theatricals foreign to her station in life and, of course, to mine. She is very proud of her family—proud to the point of asininity sometimes, I think. However, to humor her, I promised to withhold the name. Perhaps, when I have written a successful play, I will admit my identity.'

"I argued with him good-naturedly, merely out of curiosity, but he remained firm. We talked a while about things in general and then he left, assuring me he would await my verdict on the play with the greatest of interest. I told him he should have my decision very soon.

"I READ the manuscript—or, to be exact, one act of it—and immediately realized Isaac Carter did not know how to write for the stage. So I left the play downstairs with my secretary, and told him to give it to Mr. Carter when he called. He was to come back in a week's time.

"With the manuscript I put a note explaining that I could not see my way clear to produce the play, but suggested that he try again. I was trying to 'let him down easy,' as the expression goes. He got his play and that was all I heard of him for a year. Then he bobbed up again.

"He sent up his name—Isaac Carter—and I invited him to the studio. He was just as cheery as ever and under his arm was a manuscript.

" 'Well, we meet again,' he began. 'And I have another play for you, Mr. Belasco. You were so kind to me the last time I thought I'd try you with Number 2.'

"I took the manuscript. The play's title was something like *Morning Breezes,* and this time it was by Henry Blakely.

" 'Changed your name, eh?' I said.

" 'Yes. Took another *nom de plume,*' he replied with a smile. 'The first one didn't land its play, so I thought I'd try a new one.'

" 'And how about your promise to your mother?'

" 'As to my real name?'

" 'Yes.'

" 'I'm still keeping it.' Then an idea came to him. 'Would it make any difference with you in the consideration of my plays if you knew my name and it were one of considerable prominence?' he asked.

" 'Not the slightest bit,' I replied.

'With me the play is the thing, not the author. If it is a good play, it might be by Jack Dempsey and I wouldn't care. The public, in the long run, goes to see plays on their merits as entertainment providers. An author's name may attract, to a certain extent, in the beginning, because of a reputation he may have attained as an expert in his line; but if his play isn't what the public wants, it fails.'

" 'Then you won't feel hurt if I keep my promise to my mother?'

" 'Of course not!'

" 'I'm glad of that. I really was considering asking her to release me from it, but now I won't. Anyway, it's a sort of game I'm playing. I have an ambition to take a lot of my friends to a play I've written under an assumed name and, with them in ignorance of the identity of the author, hear what they say.'

"I indulged in a little laugh. 'Suppose they condemned your brainchild?' I suggested.

" 'In that case I would find surcease in the realization that they didn't know I had written it. I could put the blame on John Nom de Plume.'

"My telephone rang and he, seeing I was busy, bowed himself out, leaving the play on my desk. I took it home that night and glanced through it.

"Once more was I convinced that Isaac Carter, alias Henry Blakely, could not write successfully for the stage. I left his manuscript with my director and he called for it a week later. The news that I had rejected the play did not appear to effect him. He went away smiling. Six months after that I received a letter from him.

" 'Dear Mr. Belasco,' it said, 'I have completed another play, Number 3. Isaac Carter failed; Henry Blakely failed; so look out for George Walker. He will submit his play to you. Incidentally, mother is still obdurate about my promise. Hence my real identity must be kept under cover. But, after all, what difference does it make? I appreciate your kindness and so do Isaac Carter, Henry Blakely and George Walker.'

"He signed the letter, 'I. Carter.' It was written on a fine grade of paper which, I thought, gave forth a pleasing scent. However, it was so faint I was not sure it was there at all.

"Well, George Walker came and was just as polite and happy as ever. He left me a manuscript entitled 'Bradford's Blunder' and went his way smiling. Examining the cover I discovered the copying had been done by a well-known typing concern. My curiosity welled up. The mystery was teasing me. I summoned my secretary.

" 'Call up this typing firm,' I said, 'and explain that I want the name of the man for whom they typed "Bradford's Blunder." '

"My secretary phoned from his office downstairs. Soon he returned.

" 'I got the name,' he announced.

" 'What is it?' I asked, and I will admit there was a trace of eagerness in my tone.

" 'George Walker,' he said. 'The man left no address.'

"I sent my secretary away and had a good laugh at myself. I decided it was foolish to try to learn the young man's identity, since he was silly enough to withhold it. I picked up his play and read a dozen pages of it. That was enough. It was the worst of the three. I sent it to my director with a polite note of rejection attached and, within a week the *nom de plume* juggler came in. He read my note and laughed.

" 'Guess I'll have to try again,' was his only comment as he left the director's office."

MR. BELASCO settled back in his

chair. "And was that the end of it?" I asked.

"Well, hardly!" he replied. "Seven months later I had a phone call from him. The girl at the switchboard told me it was Mr. Carter-Blakely-Walker-Taylor who wished to speak to me. I recognized his voice when the call was transferred to my wire. It was just as cheery as ever.

"'So you've got another alias,' I said.

"'Yes,' he responded. 'The others didn't behave very well. Had no luck with them, so now I'm Jeffrey Taylor.'

"'And what have you been doing since last we met?'

"'Writing a play. It's called "Do It or Die." I want to show it to you this afternoon.'

"I had decided the farce had gone far enough. Being absolutely certain he was wasting his time trying to write plays, I had made up my mind to tell him so, provided he ever sought me out again. Here was the opportunity to do it briefly.

"'My dear Mr. Carter and so-forth,' I said, 'I'm going to tell you something, provided you'd like to hear it. Would you?'

"'Very much!' he replied.

"'You cannot write good plays. You don't understand the technique of the stage and you are wasting your time. I feel I should tell you this in order to save you from disappointments. Why not give up the idea?'

"'Are you sincere about that?' he asked.

"'Absolutely!'

"'Listen, Mr. Belasco,' he pleaded. 'I'll give it up if you'll let me show you this latest one. If you say it is no good, I'll quit.'

"Feeling in a mood to be nice to him, I promised I'd examine the newest play. A little urging on his part made me give him leave to come right over with the manuscript. In fifteen minutes he was again seated at my desk. Pleasant greetings were exchanged and then I held out my hand for the play.

"'I'm going to read it to you this time,' he announced.

"I protested, telling him I hadn't the time to listen, but he insisted that he read. His affable manner had now given way to firmness. Wishing to avoid hurting his feelings by refusing to let him unfold his plot, I suggested that he compromise by telling me the story. Finally, he accepted the plan.

"'Well,' he began, after unbuttoning his coat and throwing one side back over his hip, 'this is the story of a young playwright who tries to induce a prominent producer to accept his play.'

"'Oh! It's based on theatricals, eh?' I said.

"'Yes,' he replied, frowning. 'Note the play is called "Do It or Die." The producer indicates he doesn't want the play and the dramatist draws a revolver and shoots him. The young man has several aliases and nobody knows his right name. Therefore, he finds it easy to escape. Do you get me?'

"There was a peculiar glint in his eyes. I realized I was facing either a lunatic or an exasperated amateur playwright, determined to make me accept his play or injure me. We were alone in my studio. Sane action on my part was necessary. I smiled.

"'I like that idea immensely,' I said. 'It's great!'

"'That's good—for both of us,' he half-muttered. 'Shall I tell you the rest?'

"'No! Give me the manuscript. I accept your play—just from the idea. Will an advance of five hundred dollars be enough?'

"'Certainly!' he replied, as he handed me the manuscript. I opened my checkbook.

"'To whom shall I make it payable?'

"'Jeffrey Taylor.'

"I drew the check and handed it to him. 'Come in next week and I'll give you the contract,' I said. He thanked me quietly, took the check, buttoned his coat and left. I picked up my phone intending to have him stopped on the way out, but the switchboard girl was delayed by another call, and when I did spread the news it was too late. He was gone.

"I called my bank and stopped payment on the check. I made a brief explanation to the cashier and asked that the man be held, if he appeared for the money. He didn't come in that day; in fact, he never visited the bank. But I'm ahead of my story.

"The next afternoon he called up on the telephone. I had the girl put him on my line.

"'Well, Mr. Belasco,' he said, 'I won my bet.'

"'Your bet?' I asked, puzzled.

"'Yes. A long time ago I made a bet with a friend that David Belasco would accept a play written by me. It required drastic measures, but I won a thousand dollars.'

"'You mean one thousand five hundred dollars, don't you?' I asked, slightly bewildered.

"'Oh, no—not at all,' he returned. 'I'll never cash your check—I'll never even try to. It is the evidence that I won the wager. I'm going to frame that check.'

"I laughed when I realized that he had perpetrated a hoax on me.

"'But now you can tell me your name,' I said.

"'You'd really like to know it?' he asked.

"'Yes.'

"'All right! I'll tell it to you, but not now.'

"'When?'

"'When you produce Jeffrey Taylor's play,' he said. 'Goodby!' And as he hung up the receiver I heard him laugh.

"There," concluded Mr. Belasco, "you have my most interesting mystery. Who is or was Mr. Carter-Blakely-Walker-Taylor?"

The fifth story of this series will be told by

ETHEL BARRYMORE

It will appear in our next issue, out April 1.

Please remember,
MYSTERY MAGAZINE is published twice a month,
on the first and fifteenth.

Mr. Lee Wang

By LESLIE GORDON BARNARD

THE interior of Ling Foy's shop was usually dark enough to demand artificial illumination for the display of his silks, porcelains and a hundred novelties of the east; but the late afternoon sun contrived to send a few slanting rays over the lower roof of Charlie Soo's Laundry—and to set the motes dancing about the head of Mr. Lee Wang as he sat in his habitual place, taking note of the comings and goings of customers.

Never a shift of the head betrayed Lee Wang's interest, and yet, after you had passed him, on entering or retiring from the shop, a backward glance would convince you that his eyes had followed you all the time. Even casual customers felt the gaze and, turning almost uneasily, would smile oddly at Mr. Wang and pass on their way.

An odd, ageless, imperturbable fellow!

Not very large, either—Mr. Lee Wang—just eight inches as he sat in his golden chair that, like himself, was curiously wrought in porcelain. But then wisdom does not always find comfortable accommodation in the larger things.

No one knew from what antiquity Mr. Wang came, and the clever craftsman who was the author of his being had likely long been gathered to his ancestors. This much was certain—like other wise men, Mr. Lee Wang had come from the East.

At the moment Mr. Wang's eyes met and held those of a man who limped up to the doorway, a man with a pinched look of suffering, the physical emblems of which seemed to lie in an unnatural gait and a tremor of the hands that, had Mr. Lee Wang not possessed his unfathomable wisdon, might have appeared to be the aftermath of drugs.

The man stared at Mr. Wang, shrugged his shoulders with an odd little smile and shiver, then, finding an apparent fascination in the window display, was no longer in the direct gaze of the Chinese figure, over whom, for a moment, he had cast a shadow.

Mr. Wang might have noted, and perhaps did in this momentary glimpse, an odd thing about the passing stranger. One glance at his face and all sense of deformity was lost.

The man's face was unforgettable. His eyes, deep sunk, were the eyes of a dreamer who has carried at least some treasure of his dreams across perilous and stormy seas. There was in them at times an infinite yearning, wistful, tender, like sunlight on a day of cloud that touches into momentary but sparkling beauty the mystic brooding or uneasy darkness of the sea.

WITH a shaft of sunlight beginning to gild the motes that danced disrespectfully about his head, Mr. Wang seemed to give his attention to the movements of a tiny Eurasian girl. She kept shop for her father, Ling Foy, on such afternoons as he chose to absent himself, which was regularly twice a week. Then Mr.

Wang's attention included a man in his mid-thirties; a man who was occidental, debonair, well-built and not without a claim to good looks. This man the tiny Eurasian girl found to her taste, for her almond eyes seemed never to leave his face. In her look there was unmistakable adoration, but there was fearful and suspicious questioning, too.

"Confound that old fellow!" said the man. "He gives me the creeps. Why don't you get rid of him?"

"Father says," replied the girl laughingly, in the perfect English of her mother, "that he is as good as a detective about the place. Among our people down here it is said that Lee Wang can read the hearts of men and overthrow their evil and reward their good. They're afraid of him."

The man and the girl laughed in unison now, turning their glances toward Lee Wang in his golden chair, meeting his unfathomable smile.

"At least he is *deaf*," said the girl; then, sobering suddenly, asked: *"Tell* me. How is *she?"*

"Why will you always ask me?" grumbled the man. "The same as ever. Why can't you forget her? You know she is nothing to me, except in name."

"Then leave her—leave her for always—and come to me—to me alone!" There was a strain both of passion and of restraint in her voice, that gave it a monotonous inflection. Somewhere, probably from the kitchen of the restaurant next door, the droning of Chinese music held the same note.

"You keep forgetting," he said. "There is the money—his money. That is, since his death, her money. We have the use of it—and so all the pleasures and none of the responsibilities. See?"

"There is also the risk!" she told him, her almond eyes glancing toward the doorway.

"Do not fear," he reassured her. "Your father is busy at this moment raking in his gains."

"Or paying his losses! He has been losing badly lately."

"Well, blessings on his gains and losses alike! They give us more time to ourselves twice a week, beloved! Come kiss me—right before the eyes of old Lee Wang himself!"

She gave herself into his arms.

"I am tired," she whispered in his ear, "so tired of being under the eye and thumb of my father. There is more of my mother in me. I am not of his kind. Take me away some place—any place where I can see you more, where I can have you. Listen: tonight my father goes with Lee Sun."

One might fancy that Lee Wang's smile had broadened. The man with the dreamer's eyes, after staring in the window, had suddenly decided to cross the street, and was now in the shade of Charlie Soo's Laundry. The smile may not have been occasioned by this, for a shadow again fell across the doorway near which Mr. Wang sat.

The Eurasian girl sprang back suddenly from the embrace of her lover, who turned just in time to confront other eyes than those of Lee Wang—the eyes of Ling Foy, her father.

"Gloo-day!" said the Chinaman amiably, recognizing a professed connoisseur in such things as he stocked. "What you want today?"

His glance, however, evidently disconcerted the other man. On a sudden impulse he turned to Mr. Wang, in his patch of golden sunlight.

"How much?" he asked.

Lee Wang was not for sale. The man insisted. Ling Foy's eyes glinted with sudden light. He had lost today, lost badly, and was in a mood

where money spoke with a score of clamorous tongues. He took Lee Wang from his favorite place, and fondled him speculatively.

"Velly fline," he said. "Bling good luck good man; bad luck bad man. You good man?"

"Sure! How much you say?"

THEY bartered. Mr. Wang was unceremoniously placed upon his back on the counter, a wrapping first of tissue and then of brown paper put about his dignity, and the whole secured with the ordinary string of commerce. The girl did the wrapping. Afterward, quite casually, she accompanied the man and his parcel to the door.

"For her, eh?" Her eyes were narrowed into mere slits, through which the shafts of jealousy and suspicion shot.

"No. For the kid. It's good policy, you know. And the kid——" He grinned. "Say, you ought to see even a rag doll go to its doom. Old Wang's porcelain head and his infernal smile will be in a thousand bits by tomorrow!"

He nodded his farewell, and she stood in the doorway, leaning against the woodwork, watching him take his way with his parcel through the narrow street of the Quarter, in which the shadows deepened over the Chinese signs and their makers underneath.

In his parcel, it is certain that Mr. Lee Wang continued to smile imperturbably at this sudden change of fate.

THE man with the compelling eyes waited in the shadow across the street, his back turned until Channing had gone half a block or more with his new purchase. His mind was busy meanwhile. Funny how Oriental things had always fascinated Channing! And here he was, still buying stuff in odd, out-of-the-way stores, little reckoning that Richard Snell, comrade of that ill-fated expedition into Thibet, was so close to him in all his movements.

Channing went his way, hurrying a little now. The man behind, with infinite effort, equaled the pace. Channing glanced covertly behind. His pursuer followed, with that odd gait that was like the roll of a sailor and yet was not. He turned sharply, apparently intending to retrace his steps and confront this pursuer, but instantly Snell took shelter. Channing went ahead again. After a time, he seemed conscious of the same sensation of being followed, and confirmed it with a glance behind. With an impatient, half-fearful oath, he hailed a passing taxicab, and was driven quickly away. By climbing in hastily, he had disturbed the poorly-tied wrappings of his parcel. He laid it in his lap for readjustment. The fathomless smile of Mr. Lee Wang stared up at him.

This, of course, the man who followed at such physical cost did not know, nor is it likely he would have extracted much comfort from it. A stabbing pain at his heart was the one result of that brown paper parcel. Could it be that Channing was taking this gift to Mary? A fire burned within Snell. He could ill afford it, but a second taxi providentially appearing, he hailed it.

"Follow that other cab!" he ordered.

He watched, with fascination, the cab in front threading its way through the growing traffic of the larger arteries. Channing without doubt knew now that he was followed. Did he suspect by whom? Hardly. He would not look for a return of the dead!

As he watched, it seemed to Richard Snell that the cab ahead and all the traffic of the street blurred, and he

could see for the moment only a scrap of paper and the writing of it by which, poor fool that he was, he had committed his destinies to this man.

The scene rose up vividly before him. Night closing over a Thibetan tableland! A sense of a strange land, whose borders penned in the little party of venturesome travelers to join whose company the lure of scientific research had sufficed for Richard Snell.

He remembered how the stars alone linked one with familiar things, home things: Mary, his wife, in the garden of her father's house, awaiting the time when once more she might join him in the now vacant house that he, Richard Snell, had built for her.

It was her fancy that the stars which, within the four-and-twenty hours would look upon them both in turn, would thus link them. This night they seemed, indeed, the only link, as if the seldom-crossed borders of this almost impenetrable land were walls that, once crossed, became impassable to those within.

With this prescience upon him, he had smoked and talked with Channing, as comrades in time of crisis, and before he slept his restless sleep that night, written that letter trustfully:

> If I should get mine here, and Channing pulls through, he'll bring you this, dear. Channing has stood by me like a true pal. You remember how I didn't take to him at first, perhaps because I thought him just the least bit forward when he met *you*. I know better now. He will advise you in anything you need, and if—you are young yet, dearest, just on the threshhold of life—if you were to come to care for a man like Channing, I should rest very comfortably. I don't know why I write with such finality, but a forebodding is mine that this country is closing about me. The Tribesmen are unfriendly, and we are reduced to utmost caution. If we can make the Himalayan passes——

The paper blurred back into the traffic. With a quick catch at his heart, Snell awoke to the fact that Channing's taxi was drawing up in a familiar street. He ordered his own car to stop, paid the driver, and slipped into the shelter of a driveway now full of the growing dusk. Beyond, he could glimpse the well-known sandstone house, and Channing hurrying up the steps of it, letting himself in. Presently, in the dusk, he limped nearer, and found himself entering the garden gate, past the rustic bench his own hand had fashioned.

CHANNING entered the house, cried out heartily: "Hello, Mary!"

A woman's form appeared; her face under the light from the lamp on the newel-post by the stairs was the face of a woman prematurely aged, perhaps, but beautiful. Channing did not like age in woman. "It adds to wine," he used to laugh at the club, "but it is savorless in women." A gray hair in a woman was a sign to him that her day was past.

He kissed her.

"Everything's on the table," she said. "Hurry, won't you?"

She went to the kitchen, for Channing, on excuse that dividends had fallen off, had accepted her recent offer, when the last maid left, to try doing her own work; she brought in the baby, seating him in his high chair.

Channing came down whistling.

"Da!" greeted the baby.

"Hello, little fellow," said Channing agreeably. "Say, I've got something for you!" He went out of the room, and returned with Mr. Wang, freed at last from his wrappings. "This is Mr. Lee Wang, Snookums!"

"Mercy, you'll frighten the child!" protested Mary, laughing.

"Goo!" said the baby, and held out

his arms toward the imperturbable Mr. Wang.

"Bless me!" cried Channing, with faint stirrings of paternal pride. "The young snorter cottons to the eminent gentleman right enough! Doesn't that beat all! And they say kids are good judges of character. Now, personally, I wouldn't trust that smile as far as I could see it."

"Glug-goo!" insisted Buddy, his big eyes never leaving the face of his new acquaintance, an irregular line of baby teeth showing in pink gums.

Mr. Wang said nothing. He smiled back at the baby with extreme placidity, and seemed quite content in his new surroundings. There was undoubtedly something of the fatalist about old Lee Wang. He was, under mild protest from Buddy, set upon the buffet during the meal. The buffet was opposite Channing, so that every time he lifted his eyes from his plate the glance of Mr. Wang was upon him mockingly.

Channing shivered.

"That window's open," he said suddenly, turning.

"That's odd," said Mary Channing. "I'm certain I didn't open it." She got up to close it.

"Be sure it's bolted!" said Channing sharply, and resumed his meal.

Mr. Lee Wang, facing the window, continued to smile.

THE window shut blankly upon the man outside. For a moment, as the woman stood there to shut and bolt it, and to draw the blinds, he was so near he could have touched her. The shrubbery grew close to the house, and in it he was concealed, standing at full height so that his head was just a little above the level of the sill.

For a moment he covered his face with his hands, and called himself a woman without a woman's qualities.

Now when the dead man come to life beheld
His wife, his wife no more, and saw the babe,
Hers, yet not his, upon the father's knee,
And all the warmth, the peace, the happiness——

Odd how those lines, from out the treasury of his mind, came trooping at this time, though unthought of through the years.

How many years was it? He remembered it as having two parts—the first vivid as flame, the second confusion, nightmare inescapable. And the vivid part embraced the man inside the room there.

Let him recall it again and steel himself against the man inside that room of bright lights, and the sound of a child's laughter, and a woman's soft, familiar voice——

How had they come to get separated from the expedition—Channing and he? Well, there it was, the foreboding of his letter coming true. This country is closing about us," he had written. Somehow he knew even then that Channing, the resourceful, would get out in safety. He recalled again their wanderings, and Channing's optimism, whose shallowness he little suspected.

It was then he had given Channing the letter to Mary, and Channing, laughing at his fears, had read it, and cheerily nodded his promise of delivery if occasion made it necessary. He had felt better with that done. And how he had thanked God, when fanatical tribesmen came upon them, for a pal like Channing to stand with him in this hour! What a mirage—Channing's worth at this time; a friendly oasis rising alluringly in the desert loneliness of his spirit.

Better not think further! Inside the room was domestic contentment, peace, security, forgetfulness, unconscious of the fact that out here——

But the memory persisted.

Richard Snell remembered the manner of their disposition by a chieftain before whom they were summarily taken, who spoke through

a half-breed cast-off of civilization, understanding both tongues.

"One of you shall go unharmed," declared the chieftain, "and bring the message to your people that they must return to their own lands and their own ways, lest worse harm befall them here. But before the messenger goes he shall see what manner of death is in store for those who come this way. Now choose between you who shall go in safety with the message."

And the chief had looked upon the two curiously, at Snell with his lesser stature, at Channing with his massive frame. Through the interpreter he spoke again;

"I have heard much of the courage of your people. Let me see something of this thing of which they boast."

He motioned to a tribesman who held two stones of equal weight and size in his hands. "Take these stones. Each shall throw one. Whoever throws *farthest* shall *remain to die*. The other goes free with the message."

Snell's eyes had met Channing's. Recalling it now, Richard Snell could remember the sudden bounding hope, the thought of home and Mary; and then, blotting out this sweetness, the sight of Channing, whose build and sinews he had admired so often—Channing who had a record for ball-playing at college. The supreme unfairness of the test shook him.

Channing had things to live for, too! It was not fair. He could formulate no effective protest, however. At a signal from the chief they were to throw. Snell nerved himself for his effort. His stone and Channing's, in their first flight, were together. But Channing's fell not many yards away. Snell's distanced it easily.

The interpreter regarded Channing scornfully.

"Damn poor shot!" he said.

"Jove!" said Channing. "I slipped, Dick." But his eyes evaded Snell's. Snell knew then. Channing, whom he had admired, trusted, almost loved, had deliberately saved his own skin when the odds were against him.

THEY prepared to send Channing away in safety to his own people, with the message of warning.

"It is well that the coward should go," said the chieftain. "There is more sport in the death of a brave man. But let the coward first see the thing he has escaped, that he may tell his people."

They cut, then, tendons of Snell's arms and legs, sufficient to render him a hopeless, helpless prey. Snell remembered, from the agony of his dark hour, Channing's eyes upon him in terror—Channing crumpling up weakly at the sight, and being taken away.

It was only long after that, when he had a moment lucid enough to remember, that he thought of the letter he had given in Channing's care, commending this trusted comrade to his wife——

And still an inescapable horror bound him. They did not kill him. He prayed at first they would. How many weeks, months, years of gradual restoration of the use of his crippled members: a miracle to him, though he had heard of such recoveries—a slow, torturing process, leaving a broken body and a spent mind.

There was no freedom in it, save to remain with the chief who had taken a fancy to learn more of the ways of the outside world. Then, at last, the second miracle. The far-flung battle-line of missionary endeavor embraced these, his captives, and he was free!

He sent no word ahead, but came himself, a broken man, to see wh..t the

years had brought at home. How should he return boldly to bother the living? He who had been dead! Just a week now since he reached the long-desired goal. Seven days of revelation, tracing Channing: Channing married to Mary; Channing prosperous; Channing with a child born to him; Channing living in the very house that he, Snell, had built and willed to her.

There was a sound of voices in the little garden. Snell retreated further into concealment.

"Imagination, my dear," said the woman's voice. "I must have left it open. I'll lock everything well after you've gone. No, dear, of course, I understand you can't help being called away on business. I'm not afraid to stay alone. I'm tired, and I'll put Buddy to bed and be off myself early. Don't forget your latch-key."

Channing beat about the bushes a while. Snell could have touched him as he passed.

"You're frightening me now," said the woman, coming quickly to Channing. "It isn't like *you* to let your imagination run away from you, as mine does at times."

Channing took her in his arms, readily reassuring her.

"What's that?" he asked suddenly.

"Buddy!" cried the woman. "You really can't leave him a moment!"

They went in. Buddy, with infantile ingenuity, had contrived to seize the end of the cloth on the buffet, and had brought dishes in crashing disorder to the floor about his high chair. Sitting erect in the middle of the chaos of broken glass and china was Mr. Lee Wang quite unharmed, and smiling at the half-delighted discomfiture of Buddy.

THE man outside heard the front door close presently, caught, from the porch, the gleam of a match setting light to a cigarette. Channing's footsteps sounded on the walk, and mingled with the subdued traffic of the street. After a time the lights downstairs were shut off, and two windows upstairs sprang out against the darkness. The smaller one Snell knew to be his bathroom, the larger one the familiar bedroom. After a time again the smaller area of light disappeared; the other one was dimmed. Doubtless a night light was burning for the baby.

Snell's hand trembled, fumbling for a cord about his neck, to which was attached a key. He recalled how, when he had left with the expedition, he had taken out his key and given it to Mary; how she had said urgently: "No, no! Keep it, Dick. It's too final, your giving it to me. Keep it always with you, and remember it's just a little trip you're going on, my Dick, and when you come back the lock will be ready, quite ready for your key."

Strange! He wished he did not have it now; that through all his experiences he had not clung to it as to a fetish. Officially he was dead, and better so. She was happy with Channing. Of the home life he had had sufficient glimpse. Perhaps, since then, Channing had redeemed his moment of weakness, of cowardly deceit.

Snell found himself by the front porch; now at the door, his hand on the knob. It was an odd kind of knob, like a gargoyle, that he had himself chosen, and it looked at him maliciously, he fancied. Perhaps the lock had been changed. He wondered. He inserted his key. The lock gave as easily to his touch as if he still were master indeed. He found himself inside. A stifling emotion gripped him. Recovering himself, he removed his boots, tiptoeing his way thus. He would make just a round of the familiar rooms, whose plan-

ning had so interested him: dining-room, living-room, library.

A light burned on the newel-post in the hall, affording sufficient illumination. Just up those stairs and to the right was Mary! He must not go up. To do so would be fatal. Once there, how could he down the thing that demanded expression? Well, why should he? Why not go up and assert his rights; brand Channing a coward at heart and kill her love for him?

He found his feet already on the stairs, cautiously — cautiously. A shaft of light streamed into the darkened hall upstairs. That was from her bedroom. He must look in at least. Just one look, and he would be content to go. He tiptoed to the door. Mary lay sleeping quietly, the deep sleep of weariness. In a small cot at the side Buddy wakefully uttered a mild protest. Snell withdrew fearfully.

Buddy's big eyes seemed to be upon him. Buddy's eyes—Channing's eyes! —This the link between the man and the woman. And in a cupboard, whose door was now ajar, hung Channing's clothes and hers. On a wall was a picture of Channing himself, in hunting costume, Channing straight, handsome, healthful.

Snell lifted his hands and regarded them, moving his fingers with a motion to which he had torturingly inured himself. A broken, useless man. He retreated in spirit, and his feet kept pace. Just opposite the landing was a door closed. A desire came to him to open it, to see the room that had been his special den.

With infinite caution he entered, turning on the familiar electric switch. He started. Everything was as he had left it! A few papers on his desk, weighted down by the marble lion! His favorite pipe on the mantelpiece, the pipe that was sacred to this room alone! The grate ready to light, all laid with long-dried wood, and paper already yellowing! Even his dressing gown thrown over the arm of his chair!

Tears started to his eyes, grown used to suffering, but the radiance of a dream come true shone there. Upon the little table, a few books between the same bronze book ends.

One or two of Conrad's; a Stevenson volume or two; some leather-bound poets; his blue-bound Tennyson. His hand reached out for this latter. He was startled as the chair creaked when he let his meagre weight into it. He found the place easily, it seemed almost irresistibly, as a text might haunt a sinner. For a moment he had vague solace in the reading. He read on. Buddy uttered a protest next door, unheard.

There came the challenge:

> He therefore turning softly like a thief,
> Lest the harsh shingle should grate underfoot,
> And, feeling all along the garden wall,
> Lest he should swoon and tumble and be found,
> Crept to the gate, and open'd it, and closed,
> As lightly as a sick man's chamber door,
> Behind him, and came out upon the waste.

Snell put the book back. His teeth showed in a twist of pain. Easy enough for a poet to *write* that stuff; but to live it!

He lifted his maimed hands again, but the thing he saw was the dust upon them. He reached out a speculative finger and touched the old papers on his desk. There was more dust on his finger.

PERHAPS in some other world, some place of compensation for the ills of this, the spirit of Mary, who had kept his things thus undisturbed, would find his own; but in this world —no!

The dust had fallen over the past. He would not disturb it. In some secret place of his heart he prayed,

and from his ready storehouse of memory, awakened by his reading, the words ran in his mind:

Thou
That didst uphold me on my lonely isle,
Uphold me, Father, in my loneliness
A little longer! Aid me, give me strength
Not to tell her, never to let her know.
Help me not to break in upon her peace.

He must have just one more look at her. Then he would go—losing himself in the world's maze of far-off places, under the assumed name he now bore; and she should not be troubled by him.

The woman still slept. The child, yet more wakeful, sat up in its crib and said: "Goo!"

Snell was alarmed. The child must have seen him. But no, the gaze was not for him.

On the dresser at the side, close to where the child's crib stood, was Mr. Lee Wang, regarding the scene with his impersonal smile. Buddy kicked himself clear of his coverings and muttered his determination. He stood up, in his white teddy-bear nightwear, clung unsteadily to the side of the crib, and displayed his gums at Mr. Wang. Lee Wang smiled back. The baby's hand reached out toward the white cloth of the dresser, inviting Mr. Wang to a further exciting adventure. It was out of immediate reach, but Buddy leaned over manfully.

"B—goo!" said Buddy angrily, and reached further. He hung suspended, his stomach over the top of the wirework of the crib side, teetering back and forth!

Snell stood watching in a sudden agony of fear. An inch or two more and the child would fall headfirst to the hardwood floor below. A child's head was such a tender thing. But a move on Snell's part meant almost certain detection. His lips moved! "Buddy, go back! Buddy, go back!" but it was a soundless thing. Destinies hung upon the moment.

"Bub!" said the baby, and got its fingers on the edge of the cover at last, delightedly, trying to pull. One little tug, and—— Snell sprang forward, as Buddy cried in sudden fright, and caught the falling figure safely in his arms.

The woman sat up quickly, saw the man and cried aloud. He turned and faced her. She shrank back; then her face glowed with a sudden tender and amazing light.

"Dick!" she cried. "Oh, Dick! Dick! My Dick!"

The man, with the child still in his arms, moved toward her. Buddy's tenacity of purpose did not desert him in the crisis; his chubby hand gripped the corner of the dresser. As Snell moved, the contents of the dresser were swept to the floor.

In the middle of disorder once again Mr. Lee Wang lay, his body broken now in a dozen places. But from the chaos his head looked up, intact, and on his face was the smile of a man who has no surprise at the odd twists and turns of destiny, and who has sought beneath the surface of things the answer to the Riddle of Life.

IN THE Chinese quarter on the morrow, when men gathered to the shop of Ling Foy, there was a shaking of heads, as if one should say:

"Ling Foy's heart is as water because the girl is gone with the foreign devil Channing. Consider if it is not a judgment upon him because for the payment of his losses he put price upon Lee Wang, who could read the hearts of men, and overthrow their evil and reward their good."

And all eyes turned gravely to the place where, but yesterday, Mr. Lee Wang sat imperturbably in the sunshine, with the golden motes about his china head.

High Spots and Higher

ACCORDING to public and private statistics, nine people out of ten are interested in mystery stories. Particularly are they interested in the kind of mystery stories that are "different"; the kind that do not become monotonous by harping constantly on the same string.

Thus, in magazine make-up, as in everything else, variety is the spice of life, and a virile circulation can be kept in a lively state of health only by the strengthening inflow of rich new blood.

With this basic principle in mind, MYSTERY MAGAZINE is edited with the intention to provide its readers with a kind of kaleidoscopic program of stories that are thoroughly well written and well built; and which, above all else, pay especial heed to the just and satisfying character of the final pages.

These final pages constitute the climax. They are the most important pages of any story. Certainly, they are the most vitally important pages of a mystery story. For, no matter to what heights earlier scenes or incidents may have climbed, the climax must, of necessity, climb still higher. This is elementary mechanics in fiction writing, and what applies, or should apply, to each and every story within the covers of a fiction magazine will inevitably apply to the magazine itself if its climactic standards are maintained.

The impression each succeeding number will make will be that of a just and satisfying climax.

If, in the opinion of any reader, MYSTERY MAGAZINE does not seem to be living up to this conception of really successful magazine making, I'd surely like to know it.

THE EDITOR.

Sinister House

By CHARLES G. BOOTH

A FOUR PART STORY—PART I

CHAPTER I

THE MAN WITH THE TINY EARS

EARLY in life Mr. Conrad Gill, the diamond broker, had mastered the art of keeping one's disappointments to oneself. Good taste in all things, especially in those which pertained to the personal feelings, was one of the maxims by which he had governed his career.

But while he attributed much of his considerable success to his self-restraint, it must not be inferred that he admired the quality for its commercial properties alone, and that he did not pride himself on his appreciation of the graceful effect of a genial countenance in the face of defeat.

Whether in this matter of the Conniston intaglios his defeat was temporary or permanent, Mr. Gill did not know. Perhaps old Conniston might be induced to change his mind. He hoped so, for the intaglios were almost of the finest he had ever seen, which really meant that they were almost the finest anybody had ever seen.

But if Conniston stuck to his suddenly conceived determination to hang on, well—Mr. Gill shrugged his modish shoulders—he would accept defeat gracefully, as usual; so gracefully, indeed, that Conniston, a sentimentalist at heart no doubt, might be persuaded to relent and let him have them.

If he didn't—Mr. Gill shrugged again—once more he would have demonstrated that his sense of values was not confined to the gems which, in the channels of trade, constantly passed through his sensitive fingers.

The beauty of the night and the tranquil motion of the limousine under the skilful pilotage of his son, Victor, who sat alone in the front seat, inclined Mr. Gill to reflection. He let his nimble mind run over the interview which had just terminated in old Conniston's library at the Casa de Ayer, and the one that had preceded it.

He had met Colonel Conniston in Los Angeles a month previously. The antiquary had expressed a desire to discuss with him the sale of the gems. Would he inspect them at the Casa de Ayer, just off the coast highway, at his convenience?

Mr. Gill had seen the famous collection at the Panama-California Exposition in San Diego a decade or so before, and he had experienced some little difficulty in repressing his enthusiasm at the invitation to the point at which he could accept it without of loss of dignity to himself.

A definite date had not been fixed. However, Mr. Gill had allowed a reasonable interval to elapse before presenting himself in company with his son, who, in a moderate way, was also his partner at the Casa de Ayer.

But only to find that the Colonel had suddenly changed his mind! That very evening, in fact! He would

not sell at any price! And Mr. Gill had been prepared to go to three hundred thousand!

His disappointment was intense. He had not intended to keep the gems permanently, of course; but he had hoped to retain them for a little while before passing them on at a reasonable profit. But the old man was not to be moved and after congratulating him on his collection and declining his offer of hospitality for the night they had wished him good-evening.

PERHAPS they had been over-hasty in taking their departure, Mr. Gill meditated. The Casa de Ayer had that charming Spanish-California atmosphere which he loved so well and encountered too seldom. And Colonel Conniston, notwithstanding his inexplicable obstinacy in this matter of the intaglio gems and an almost startling irascibility of manner, was as thoroughly a part of the picture as Don Silvestre Calderon must have been when he built the place nearly a hundred years before.

There remained only some fifty acres of the original Mexican California grant, but the old man had withstood the subdividers with their tempting offers, their hideous signboards, and their chattering free-lunch excursionists, and Mr. Gill honored him for it. Ah, well, they would be on their way tomorrow.

By now, the limousine had left the Conniston estate several miles behind. They were on a rough dirt road which rose in a long, sweeping curve, and as the car ascended the grade, the poignant beauty of the night held Mr. Gill entranced.

The moon was nearly full. A magic wand had waved and earth and sky and silver sea were a fairy universe in which Mr. Gill felt that he and his limousine had no right whatever. All too soon the car must top the slope and the architectural inharmonies of Ocean Strand on the other side would mar the matchless loveliness of the scene. Mr. Gill touched his son on the shoulder.

"Slow down, Victor. The night is precious. We must not miss it."

Physically, they resembled each other, Mr. Gill and his son. They were of the middle height, though Mr. Gill had filled out comfortably, whereas Victor was still lean and wiry; their eyes were black and piercing, with Victor's a trifle the harder, perhaps; their noses were slightly aquiline, their lips were thin and bloodless, their fingers long and sensitive; and each had a striking pallor of countenance and a skin so flawless in texture as to suggest a bit of Chinese porcelain.

But here the resemblance ended. Victor Gill was dour, silent, inscrutable. He reminded his father of a river, the source and the outlet and the depth of which is unknown.

Mr. Gill regretted the existence of these qualities in his son, but he had given up trying to solve him years ago. Nevertheless, Victor could drive as shrewd a bargain as Mr. Gill himself and there were moments when the latter had high hopes of him, though he realized that he would never be the man his father was.

The limousine had almost reached the crest of the slope now. Here the view was at its best and Mr. Gill abandoned himself to the beauty of the night. In spite of his bitter disappointment, he was inexpressibly glad that they had driven down.

He had thought that, with the coming of the subdivider and the hordes from the middle west, romance had perished in California, whereas here he found it rising on the breath of the sage—a rare incense that went to his head like old wine.

Had Mr. Gill found himself slipping back into a more spacious age; had

his limousine by some forgotten magic turned itself into a stage coach of a hundred years ago; had there suddenly appeared on the brow of the hill a lean, dark figure in sombrero and silver spurs, pistol in hand, commanding them to stand and deliver, he would have accepted the situation unquestioningly.

So it happened that when the latter part of his absurd fancy became actuality, Mr. Gill, in a sense, was prepared for it.

ON THE top of the slope, a solitary eucalyptus tree stood guard over the unfrequented road.

As the limousine drew abreast of the tree a man leaped out of its shadow and ran swiftly toward the car.

He wore a brown belted suit. A hat of the same color was pulled down over his eyes, and a triangle of white handkerchief concealed the lower part of his face. The man sprang onto the running board of the limousine.

"Stop the car and stick up your hands!"

The muzzle of an automatic pistol pressed into Victor Gill's white cheek. The lean brown hand that held it was as steady as a rock, and the dark, tempestuous eyes above the triangle of handkerchief were bright with anger and imperious with command.

Victor Gill shot one swift look at the man, then he threw on the brakes. The car stopped suddenly, pitching Mr. Gill forward on the cushions.

"Now, stick up your hands! Both of you!" The pistol swung from one head to the other. "And be sharp about it!"

There being nothing else to do, they obeyed him.

"Think of the devil," Mr. Gill murmured unsteadily.

The masked man gave a short, hard laugh.

"You'd better, or you may see him."

The broker shivered a little. "What do you want?"

"A good deal, Conrad Gill."

The latter grew a shade paler.

"Ah, you have the advantage of me." The tremor in his tone denied his assumption of lightness.

"I propose to retain it, too! If you carry any weapons, keep your hands off 'em!"

The threat was unmistakable.

"We don't! I can't bear firearms. What do you want?"

"The Conniston intaglios! Hand 'em over, quick!"

"Ah!" the exclamation was as much a gasp of relief as a cry of astonishment. Mr. Gill thanked his stars that Colonel Conniston had his mind. "What makes you think I have them?" he temporized.

"Never mind. I *know!*" There was something starkly emphatic about that last word. "Hand 'em over and be quick about it!"

"My dear sir——"

"None of that! Do as I say!"

"But we haven't got them!"

There came a leap of fury in the dark eyes above the triangle of handkerchief. The pistol jerked up, then down again, and advanced to within an inch of Mr. Gill's forehead. Never in all his well-nurtured life had the broker encountered death in any but a strictly impersonal sense, but now he was sure that he recognized it in the black muzzle of the pistol and in the furious stare of the dark eyes behind it.

"I'll give you thirty seconds!" The voice was savage; otherwise it might have been pleasantly toned.

Mr. Gill's blood ran cold

"But I tell you we haven't got them!" he insisted desperately. "Conniston wouldn't sell! Changed his mind at the last moment! Isn't that so, Victor?"

All this while Victor Gill had maintained a watchful silence, according the masked man so searching a scrutiny that no visible detail of the latter's person or attire could have escaped his piercing black eyes.

"Conniston would not sell the intaglios," Victor Gill said in his passionless voice, apparently undisturbed by any emotion whatever. "We have not got them. Better take yourself off," he added significantly.

The man did not move. "Twenty seconds, Mr. Gill."

The broker attempted bluster.

"This sort of nonsense passed out with the stage coach fifty years ago!" he shrilled, utterly abandoning his romantic illusions. "You can't get away with it, young man! There's a penalty that'll engage your attention for some time to come! Rank nonsense! Put that thing down!"

"Ten seconds, Mr. Gill."

The broker's suave composure now completely deserted him.

"We haven't got them!" he gasped hysterically. "Conniston wouldn't sell, I tell you! Changed his mind. Put that thing down!"

"Five seconds," the man said, coldly.

"Mr. Gill's eyes protruded grotesquely. "For God's sake, don't shoot! Victor—do something! Tell him we haven't got them!"

"I have done so, father," the son said impassively.

THE collapse of Mr. Gill was rather pitiable, and the masked man eyed him appraisingly for a moment. He seemed less sure of himself now, as if doubt had come upon him. The fury left his eyes. Suddenly, he seemed to come to a decision. Stepping down from the running board he opened the doors of the limousine, still covering the two men within, and indicated the road.

"Get out!" he commanded. "I'm going to search you!"

Victor Gill complied immediately, in silence, and without any manifestation of emotion whatever. The older man was too overcome by what he believed to have been a perilously narrow escape from destruction to alight without assistance from his son.

They were driven in front of the glaring headlights of the machine and the masked man went through their garments and over their persons exhaustively and unceremoniously. Bewilderment rather than disappointment appeared to attend his failure to find the intaglios.

"No tricks!" he commanded curtly, as he turned to the limousine.

There were compartments in each of the four doors; these he examined first. Then he poked around the gray upholstery of the seats and peered down onto the carpeted floor.

Suddenly, Mr. Gill caught the hum of a car ascending the grade from Ocean Strand and saw the flare of its headlights on the curving road. His heart began to race.

Had the man seen it. Apparently not.

Mr. Gill glanced surreptitiously at his son. Victor responded with a scarcely perceptible nod and pursed his lips for silence.

The ascending headlights grew enormously; their flare knit into the beams from the lamps of the limousine.

Evidently, the machine was traveling at a high rate of speed. Mr. Gill began to grow hot and cold by turns. How would the situation break? Would the man show fight or would he run? The latter, Mr. Gill devoutly hoped. He had a horror of the crack of firearms, the bite of lead in human flesh.

The car swooped up the grade, a purring monster with eyes of fire,

Now it was a hundred yards below them—now sixty!

Still the man at the limousine did not see or hear it, the freshening southwesterly wind carrying off much of the *whir* of its swift approach.

Mr. Gill began to tremble. He glanced at his son. Victor stood with arms folded, pallid face as inscrutable as ever; black eyes as hard and bright as bits of steel. Once again Mr. Gill realized the unfathomable qualities of his son.

And then, in a blinding flare of light, the monster was upon them.

There came the scream of brakes, the grind of tires skidding on the dirt road, and the machine, a touring car, slid to a standstill, nose to nose with the limousine.

Mr. Gill saw the masked man leap back from the limousine and rush forward into the flare cast by the headlights.

And then a singular thing happened.

The man flung up his hand as if something had struck him in the face and he stopped dead in his tracks.

A SHABBY person in a gray cap and a khaki shirt slouched behind the wheel of the touring car. He looked white around the lips and his hands gripped the wheel convulsively, as if he had just grasped the nature of the situation he had come upon.

But it was not at him that the man who had concealed his face was staring, but at the girl in the seat behind. She had risen to her feet; her hands were gripping the back of the front seat for support. Her eyes met the man's dark, reckless ones across the flare of light.

The girl was pretty, darned pretty, thought Mr. Gill. She had removed her hat and her bobbed hair stood out like a nimbus about her head. Its shade was that rare coppery-red which is more copper colored than red, and the clear white of her skin set it off like a flame. Her eyes, he felt sure, would be that deep luminous blue, as if a light were burning behind them, which made one doubt one's materialism.

But as Mr. Gill continued to stare at the girl, there swept across her charming face such a tempest of emotion, bewilderment and horror and contempt, that he held his breath in expectation of thunder and lightning. The lightning played in the girl's eyes, but there was no thunder; not so much as a tiny whisper of it.

The purr of the automobile engine, the sigh of the breeze, the wild music of the surf below grew remote and meaningless. One could have heard a leaf drop. Still neither of them spoke, and Mr. Gill, whose sense of situation was always immoderately strong, knew that he had stumbled upon drama, the tension of which nothing could enhance.

Suddenly, the man who had covered his face staggered back, dropping his pistol. Then he turned swiftly and, with a low cry that was either a sob or a moan, plunged down the slope, crackling through the sage, and disappeared from sight.

Mr. Gill quickly recovered himself and ran forward.

"My dear young lady!" he exclaimed in his soft voice. "You have saved us from a nasty situation! That rascal meant business!"

The girl's face was drawn and colorless. Instead of looking at Mr. Gill, she touched the chauffeur on the shoulder.

"Oh, do go on!" she cried in a tense voice. "It can't be far now."

The man shifted uneasily.

"I don't figure on runnin' into no hold-up, ma'am!" he said. "I gotta wife and family. Better come out in the morning."

The girl's eyes flashed and she put her hand on the door.

"Go back if you want to. I'll walk."

"My dear young lady," Mr. Gill exclaimed again, his voice almost a caress now, "you shall do nothing of the sort! My car is at your service. Where do you wish to go?"

But here the chauffeur cut in sullenly: "Aw, I'll take a chanct! Can't be more'n a couple of miles, anyhow. He'll have to jump some to stop this baby once she gets agoin'!"

The girl sank back in the seat and before Mr. Gill could voice a protest the powerful car leaped forward and roared down the slope. He stared after the diminishing tail light with a flush of mortification mantling his pallid face. Turning, he saw his son examining the pistol the man had dropped.

"Dangerous looking weapon," he commented casually.

"Oh, I don't know," Victor responded coolly.

"You would, if it had gone off!"

"It isn't loaded."

"Not loaded?" Mr. Gill echoed blankly. When a crisis has passed, it is always disappointing to learn that one hasn't been in danger, after all. "It might have been," he stated defensively.

"Of course," Victor agreed dispassionately.

THEY got into the car. Victor Gill started the engine. There was a curious intent expression in his remarkable eyes as he started down the slope at the twinkling lights of Ocean Strand. His thin, slender fingers curled around the wheel.

"I wonder if she is going to Conniston's place," Mr. Gill mused.

"It looked that way."

"She certainly recognized him."

"Yes. So did I."

"What!"

"He was the man we ran into at Conniston's."

Mr. Gill whistled. "How do you know? His face was covered."

"His ears weren't."

"What about his ears?"

"The smallest I ever saw."

"Those eyes of yours, my boy!" Mr. Gill exclaimed admiringly. "You see more than the Lord ever intended man to see!"

He leaned back on the cushions.

"That girl knew him and she's on her way to Conniston's," he muttered. "Queer! I suppose we shall have to report to the police."

Victor nodded. "Soon enough in the morning. They won't catch him, anyhow."

The car moved forward, and gaining momentum swept down the slope toward the twinkling lights of Ocean Strand.

Mr. Gill, ever a "connoisseur of situations," let his nimble mind run back over the affair.

Why was the girl going to the Casa de Ayer? What did she know of this young man who had stopped them? What had he been doing at Conniston's? Had the man and the girl anything to do with Conniston's refusal to sell the intaglios?

There was something queer behind it all and Mr. Gill wished he knew what it was.

However, a minute or so later, Victor drew up before the nondescript hotel which was to shelter them for the night, and faced with the probability of an unaired bed and doubtful eggs for breakfast, Mr. Gill let the affair recede to the back of his mind.

CHAPTER II

THE HOUSE OF YESTERDAY.

THE original estate of Don Sylvestre Calderon, gentleman of quality, patron of the arts, and former subject of the King of Spain, had comprised many

thousands of acres of that picturesque peninsula of the southern California coast locally known as Point Almo.

The site of Ocean Strand, the rocky shore line from the village to the end of the point seven miles south of it, the western slope and much of the crest of the rise which forms the backbone of the peninsula had been well within it.

There were *fiestas* in those days and love and life and laughter. Too many and too much, perhaps, for the material prosperity of those children of the sun. Lean-faced cowboys, fantastic in spur and sash and sombrero, performed prodigious feats with the half-wild cattle which roamed the plains and mesa land on which the coast cities were presently to stand.

Dark-eyed *señoritas* gave color and unfulfilled promise to the land. Courtly dons wondered a little and doubted a little and strove bravely to perpetuate their charming adaptation of an Old-World feudalism already in decay.

This was before the coming of the conquering Americans, men with colder blood and hands of iron. Their advent heralded the collapse of the empire of the *padres* and the dons and the gradual break-up of the great estates.

As these unexploited areas fell into the hands of a more practical if less sensitive race, there came a vast inpouring of eastern capital; development commenced on a huge scale.

Bankrupt ranches became commercial successes; towns sprang up overnight; irrigation projects flourished; the prune and the peach, the fig and the walnut, the orange and the grape turned desert waste and mesa into orchard and vineyard. Later, came the more blatant subdivider and the oil driller; then the cameraman, the booster, and the middle-west invasion.

Of the kingdom of the *padres* and the dons there remains but an echo, as from a remote and distant past: a fragrance as of the evening jessamine in the early hours of morning. Presently, that, too, will be gone.

The Calderon estate had fared somewhat differently. Of the original grant there remained but fifty acres, and these were now in the possession of Colonel Conniston. The rest of the property had fallen into less sympathetic hands.

But apart from that section of it upon which stood the village of Ocean Strand, most of it had escaped exploitation of any sort. Held for speculation purposes, it was still in that state of virgin primitiveness in which Don Sylvestre had found it a hundred years before.

A paved road which branched off the coast highway, El Camino Real, skirted the shore of the east side of the peninsula and ran out to the lighthouse at the extreme end of the point. Here an enterprising caterer by the name of Jim Beasley operated a roadhouse known as the Green Crocodile.

At the end of the point the pavement stopped. The road continued on around the west shore of the peninsula, past the Conniston grounds and on into Ocean Strand; but it was ungraded and in wretched condition.

That steady stream of traffic whose destination was the Green Crocodile went along the east road. A sojourn at the notorious roadhouse made imperative a return by the same route. There had been a time when occasionally tipsy parties got on the west road. One such had gone over the cliff.

The Green Crocodile had then enjoyed one of its periodical raids and the highway commission had closed the dirt road at that end.

Some five miles north of the Green Crocodile were the Conniston grounds. They lay between the road and the edge of the cliff. A drive branched off from the road and

wound its way through a grove of cypress and eucalyptus trees to the edge of the cliff upon which, a hundred years before, Don Sylvestre Calderon had built the Casa de Ayer, one of the most pretentious houses of the Spanish-Mexican era.

It is not known why he called his home the House of Yesterday. Perhaps, with keener insight than that of most of his fellow-countrymen, he foresaw the inevitable dissolution of the empire of the *padres* and the dons, and realized with an exquisite bitterness that his home could never be anything but a house of yesterday.

Shortly after the coming of the Americans, the body of Don Sylvestre was found in one of the deeper caves up the shore. It was not known whether he had *permitted* the tide to trap him or not, but the tragedy occurred the day after the greater part of his estate was taken away from him.

Colonel Conniston had set a door over the narrow mouth of the cave and fitted into it a brass plate in memory of the man who had died there.

FIFTEEN minutes after her encounter with Mr. Gill and the man who had concealed his face, the girl, Gail Hollister, found herself entering the historic grounds of the Casa de Ayer. She caught her breath and clasped her hands together as the beauty of the parkland cast its spell upon her. She had not thought it would be just like this.

There were eucalyptus trees, tall and melancholy, and stiff-boughed cypresses; date palms with fronds like bayonets and boles like pineapples, and feathery peppers through which the moon etched delicate silver traceries on the cinder drive. It was like entering a fairyland in shadow. The sweet serenity of the scene soothed the hurt she had received.

Great trees enshrouded the house in shadow, but as the headlights of the car flared upon it she saw that it was of adobe, cream in color, and that the roof was of red tile. She got a glimpse of a lawn grown rank, of a red-tiled terrace, and of a balcony hung with wistaria, honeysuckle, and bougainvillea. The scent of evening jessamine met her like an incense. The place was perfect! If only Colonel Conniston were a part of it!

"Isn't it wonderful!" she whispered as the car stopped in front of the door.

"Not so worse," the chauffeur admitted. He put her suitcase down on the steps. "That'll be seventy-five cents, ma'am. Thank you!"

The man fumbled with his cap.

"About that hold-up. I s'pose them fellers in the limousine will report it! D'you want me to phone in, or will you?"

Gail whitened a little. For a moment the sensuous beauty of the garden had driven the fantastic encounter to the back of her mind. If only it might prove some horrible nightmare!

"I don't know," she faltered. "The two men—it's really their affair. Colonel Conniston will know what to do."

The man nodded. "It's up to you then, ma'am."

The car moved on.

Gail found herself wielding a knocker which was fixed to the great copper-studded oak door before her. It was an ivory tusk weighted with metal and reverberations of sound poured out upon her. She hastily let it go and waited. A minute or so passed, and then the door opened some seven or eight inches and in this space there appeared the gray head and puckered face of a little brown gnome of a man with black button eyes and an air of suspicious inquiry about him.

"What is it?" he demanded in a thin, far-away voice.

Gail smiled. "I am Miss Hollister. Colonel Conniston expects me."

"To be sure! To be sure!" the little man exclaimed, and flung the door open. "Come right in! Come right in!"

He picked up her suitcase and Gail saw that the suspicion had died away in his eyes. Their expression was wistful and there was something that was remote in them, as if this strange little man lived largely in the past, occasionally in the present, and never in the future. He led her through a spacious hall finished in a darkish wood against which Gail caught the glint of light on old armor. They came to a door which he opened, in his thin voice announcing:

"Miss Hollister."

His eyes followed her inquiringly as she entered.

THE room was distinctive. Time had mellowed it as it does some lovely thing come up from antiquity. Great dark beams spanned the murky ceiling. From one of them hung a bronze electric lamp which spilled colorful light upon the centre of the floor and over the old and massive furniture.

Dark and mysterious tomes lined two of the walls, reaching up to the ceiling. A steel vault was set into one of the walls. Oriental draperies concealed a window and a bright Oriental rug covered the floor. There was a library table of antique design and a fireplace with an elaborately carved mantel. A eucalyptus log blazed in the grate, faintly scenting the room with its pungent odor.

And with his back to the fireplace, legs apart, stood a little round oldish man with pink cheeks, an obstinate chin, and an abundancy of white mustache. His blue eyes were adventurous and twinkling, and they examined Gail from her smart shoes to her copper-red head with frank admiration.

He was altogether delightful, was Gail's swift conclusion.

"Red!" he chuckled.

Gail smiled. "Copper!" she corrected him firmly.

"To be sure!" the little man boomed. "A rarity, Miss Hollister. Treat it as such, my dear, and forgive me. I never could keep a still tongue in my head."

They shook hands. The colonel regarded Gail a trifle doubtfully.

"McEwan said he was sending me an authority on antiques. One who thoroughly understood catalog work, Miss Hollister. My stuff is in a frightful mess. Frightful! Never had any head for bookwork!"

"I am Doctor McEwan's assistant," Gail reminded him gently.

"Of course you are!" he agreed heartily. "So it follows that you must be competent. We shall work together delightfully, I am sure. But I rather expected——" The colonel paused.

"An antique," Gail suggested.

He chuckled. "Something of the sort. Sensible shoes, last year's hat——"

"And horn-rimmed glasses."

"To be sure! Instead he sends me youth and beauty——"

"And red hair!"

"A charming combination, Miss Hollister."

The colonel struck a little Chinese gong which stood on the mantel.

"You must be famished!" he exclaimed, rubbing his hands together. "I could do with a snack myself."

The little brown gnome of a man appeared.

"See what Mrs. Wessels has for us in the icebox, Dimity."

The old man bobbed his head and with a sharp glance at Gail hurried out.

"Another of my antiques," the colonel chuckled. "You mustn't mind him looking at you that way. He has a trick of watching folk with those button eyes of his. Watching and listening and coming upon one unexpectedly out of all sorts of corners! But you'll like Dimity for all of that. I've had him with me for thirty years. Been all over the world with me. He saved my life once and ever since he's had the notion in his queer old head that he was bound to look after me. Deuced embarrassing at times.

"He lost his wife years ago; he thought the world of her, and it seems to have touched his brain a little. Well, many of us are none too sane when it comes to that."

Dimity returned, bearing a tray set for two. There were delicious ham and chicken sandwiches, a salad, fruit and cream and cake and tea. Colonel Conniston disclosed a hearty appetite and since Gail had dined indifferently that evening they cleared the tray between them.

"I'll have Mrs. Wessels take you to your room," he announced when they had finished.

"I'd love to see your collection first, if it's not too late," Gail said.

The colonel slapped his thigh. "Splendid! You shall."

He took a bunch of keys from his pocket and unlocked a stout oak door near the fireplace. Opening it, he switched on lights and stood aside for Gail to enter.

She found herself in a long, narrow room with drawn shades. Glass cases extended down each side of it and along the middle. They were crammed with a multitude of antiques, curios, and relics from almost every age in the history of man and representative of nearly every race on the face of the earth. A superficial attempt at classification had been commenced, but apparently the colonel had given it up in despair.

ACCUSTOMED as Gail was to the method and order which prevailed at the Westcoast Museum in Los Angeles, her place of employment, this bewildering and not infrequently absurd disorder was an affront to her critical sense. The colonel enthused incessantly over his really comprehensive collection, but he had no illusions about his instincts for classification.

"An awful mess, isn't it?"

"Anarchy!" Gail cried with a shudder. "English pewter caressing that darling Ming vase! And those gold-mounted French dueling pistols rubbing shoulders with an Australian boomerang! And look at that little jade god!" she whispered as they passed on to the next case.

Conniston lifted the cover and Gail deftly extracted from a disorder of small bronze temple gongs the little Chinese figure that had caught her eye. Barely three inches in height, the figure, nevertheless, was carved with an exquisite attention to detail. The toes and fingers were perfect. Gail was charmed with it.

"Isn't it lovely!" she cried.

Conniston stroked his abundant mustache.

"It is! There's a yarn goes with it, too. I must tell it to you some day. John O'Neil and I got it in Northern China years ago."

Gail's heart seemed to stop beating.

"Who did you say?" she whispered.

"John O'Neil, the explorer. I was with him in China. He died ten years ago. Poor John! He was one of the best! You couldn't have known him!"

"No," said Gail. "I didn't know him."

There was silence for a moment.

The colonel's face had saddened as he spoke of his dead friend. But now there came a flash of fire in his blue eyes as if the name had recalled some recent unpleasant experience. In a moment he was himself again, how-

ever, and they passed on to the next case.

It contained the most comprehensive collection of idols that Gail had ever seen. There were gods of jade and ivory, of wood and ebony and stone; even a little silver god. And they were from India and China and the Islands; from Persia and Japan and the old Mexico of the Aztecs and the Mayas. Some of them were ugly, most of them were absurd; a few were lovely. Behind all of them ran a tale of fantasy and terror. Somehow a little Chinese snuffbox, exquisitely done, got into their midst.

"Snuff for the gods," chuckled Colonel Conniston.

"I want everything straightened out, numbered, and catalogued," he declared when, a little later, they had passed out of the room. "Dates, historic interest, value, fabric, and so forth."

"You have notes?" Gail asked, startled a little at the largeness of his desire.

"To be sure! Millions of them! But I can't make head or tail of most of 'em! Are you good at reading indifferent handwriting?"

"Yours?"

The colonel colored. "Er—yes. I am rather careless at times."

Gail smiled. "I'll do my best. I've been helping Doctor McEwan with a Maya tablet the Ellison Expedition brought up from Yucatan."

"Splendid!" the colonel enthused. "Mine isn't that bad." He glanced at his watch. "Bless my soul! It's eleven o'clock! How we old chaps talk! You'd better be off to bed!"

Gail hesitated for a moment, then she said: "You haven't shown me the intaglios, Colonel. I'd love to see them!"

Again there came a flash of fire in his twinkling eyes. Then he gave his genial chuckle.

"The emeralds, eh?" he cried. "They all want to see our emeralds. And so you shall, my girl! So you shall!"

He went to the vault, spun the dial, and set the indicator to the combination. Opening the door, he entered the vault and reappeared with two shallow, covered trays, which he impressively placed on the antique table.

Gail caught her breath as the dazzling beauty of the incised gems leaped up at her. They lay on beds of white satin arranged in the form of crescents, the larger stones toward the apex of each crescent. On the white satin they gleamed like green fires on fields of virgin snow. Two-thirds of the gems were heraldic in design; the rest were classic.

THERE was something hypnotic about their fiery beauty. Gail, ever imaginative, wondered if they might not so fascinate a beholder as to arouse in him an uncontrollable desire to possess them; if there might not be an affinity between their cold green fires and some enslaved human heart. The thought was absurd, of course, and she put it out of her mind.

"Intaglio work," Conniston was saying, "is incised engraving, the opposite of the cameo process, engraving in relief. The ancients practised the art. It has been revived many times, but it is almost unknown now. The Italians did clever work, some of it is there. . . . I was offered three hundred thousand for them, as lately as tonight!" he suddenly declared in a dry voice.

His tone compelled Gail to look up at him.

"You did not take it?"

"I did not!"

So passionate was his utterance that Gail was amazed.

"I'm so glad!" she cried in a moment. "They are too lovely to sell! You are going to keep them?"

The question was unfortunate in its effect upon the Colonel.

"Sell them!" he rapped out in a sudden flare of fury. "Sell them! That young pup stood up and told me I'd have to—told me——" His extraordinary fury choked him; he grew incoherent; his pink cheeks crimsoned. Then he went on again thickly: "Young fools! With their new ideas and their new morals and their contempt for age and authority! 'Don't give a damn for this and don't give a damn for that!' Telling me what I should do! In my own house! Impudence! Sell them——"

He broke off sharply and clapped his hand to his heart. His face went deathly white and he lurched forward.

"Colonel! You are ill!" Gail ran to his side and put her arm about him. She could feel his body trembling against her own. For a moment she held him, then he shook her off.

"All right! All right!" he whispered. "Nothing, only this fool heart of mine!" He gulped a glass of water which stood on the tray. His color slowly returned. "All right, now!"

"You are sure!" Gail cried distressfully. "Shall I ring for Dimity?"

"No, no!" he exclaimed vehemently. "I'm all right, I tell you!" His eyes fell on the intaglios; he straightened. "Sell them! Of course I'll sell them. But I'll make that young pup wait a while first." He took another gulp of the water. "What an old fool I am going off like that! Never could keep a still tongue! You'll forgive me, won't you, my dear?"

He returned the intaglios to the vault, locked it, and glanced at his watch again. "Eleven-thirty! Time old dogs were in their beds!"

He picked up the little gong beater. But instead of striking the gong he put it down again and, crossing unsteadily to the door which led into the hall, jerked it open. Dimity tottered into the room, recovered himself, and stood blinking owlishly at them, apparently not greatly concerned at his discovery.

"Listening again, eh, Dimity!" the colonel rallied. "What is it this time?"

"I thought you might be needing me, sir," the little man said in his thin voice. "I just came."

Conniston seemed on the verge of losing his temper again; he laughed shortly instead.

"Have Mrs. Wessels come here."

The little man hurried off, shaking his head. Gail stared after him in bewilderment; but the colonel made no further comment on the odd behavior of his old servant. Rightly indeed had this place been called the House of Yesterday, she reflected.

A minute or so later, as Gail followed the housekeeper up the great dark staircase, she remembered that she had not mentioned her encounter on the highway to the colonel. And then, because she was always honest with herself, she admitted in the secrecy of her own mind that she never had intended to. A sense of foreboding took possession of her, tightened itself around her heart like threads of steel.

"Kerry!" she whispered to herself. "Why did you do it?"

CHAPTER III

THE MAN IN THE MOONLIGHT.

MRS. Wessels was an ample, rosy-cheeked woman of middle age. She was addicted to tight lacing and voluminous skirts, and she was the

widow of a pork butcher whose memory she deeply revered. Mrs. Wessels was English and looked it, and Gail fell in love with her at once.

"These stairs do puff me!" she panted as she joined Gail on the landing above. "Here's your room. The colonel 'ad me make it real nice for you. I do 'ope you'll like it, Miss 'Ollister."

She led Gail into a room finished in walnut. A bright rug covered the floor. There were roses on the dressing table and books on a writing desk. A bathroom adjoined, for much as the colonel appreciated the charming Old-World atmosphere of the Casa de Ayer he did not despise the modern conveniences.

"It's dear of you to go to so much trouble!" Gail said gratefully. "The room is lovely!"

Mrs. Wessels smiled happily and flung open the French window. Through it Gail stepped onto a small balcony and beheld the gardens softly mysterious in moonlight and shadow below. Beyond them were the orchards, and to the west was the ocean with a silver scarf across its dark and troubled breast.

"It's like fairyland!" Gail whispered ecstatically.

"'Eaven," Mrs. Wessels said piously.

Gail ran her eyes along the coast to the end of the point and there she caught the twinkling gleam of a green light, minute with distance. There was something cold and sinister about it as if it were the eye of some malevolent monster, brooding over the tranquillity of the night.

"What is that green light?" she asked.

The housekeeper stiffened. "That's the Green Crocodile, Miss 'Ollister!"

"A road house?"

"Yes. And no better than it ought to be, neither. Fine goings on they have from all one 'ears. I 'ope you'll never see the inside of it!"

Gail smiled absently. Her eyes were troubled and her thoughts were elsewhere. For a moment longer they stood on the balcony; then they went inside.

"We 'ave breakfast at eight," the housekeeper said, as she closed the window. "Eight sharp, if you please. The colonel likes it prompt. What kind of a stummick 'ave you, Miss 'Ollister?"

Gail looked at her, startled.

"Why, I don't know, Mrs. Wessels. Just an every-day sort of a stomach, I suppose."

"What I mean is this," the housekeeper hurried on. "I 'ave three kinds of stummicks to set up for. Take the colonel, now. He's American. 'Ot cakes and waffles and syrup. Nice but indigestible. Then there's me. I'm English. Toast and marmalade and tea with *cream* in it, and roast beef and Yorkshire pudding for dinner. 'Good enough for Royal George,' as poor Wessels used to say. And there's Dimity—'e likes 'ot stuff. Chili con carne! 'Ot tamale! And *peppers!* 'Orrible! You see 'ow it is, Miss 'Ollister."

Gail pondered gravely for a moment.

"Mine is just a plain sort of stomach, Mrs. Wessels. Cereal and fruit and toast and coffee for breakfast. But some day you shall bake me a Yorkshire pudding and smother it with gravy, and one of Dimity's hot tamales, perhaps."

"That I will!" Mrs. Wessels assured her, vastly relieved.

"Surely Dimity isn't a Mexican?" Gail inquired.

Mrs. Wessels pursed her lips.

"Not 'im! As American as you are! And a queer one at that! What with 'is peeping and watching and listening and 'is carrying around of his dead with 'im——"

"His what!"

"In 'er corfin, Miss 'Ollister! Cross my 'eart, I do!"

"Mrs. Wessels!" Gail was aghast.

"It amounts to the same thing! His wife died years ago and 'e's been a bit off ever since. Burned 'er body, 'e did, poor thing——"

"Cremated it, you mean!"

"That's it! And he's carried it around in a box ever since."

"An urn?"

"An urn, to be sure. Has it on 'is dressing-table where he can see it. It isn't 'ealthy, Miss 'Ollister. And it isn't *right*. What's a body going to do on the last day? Now, Wessels! I put 'im away decent——" Mrs. Wessels broke off sharply. "Here it's twelve o'clock and me keeping you up with my talk! And you *that* tired! I do 'ope you'll sleep well. Is there anything else I can get you?"

"Nothing, thank you, Mrs. Wessels."

"Good-night, then, my dear!"

Mrs. Wessels took her departure.

GAIL undressed slowly and got into bed. She was dead tired and her eyes ached for sleep, but she knew that she could not rest. The colonel's volcanic personality, his remarkable collection of antiques and intaglios, and Mrs. Wessels' stream of chatter had soothed her.

But now that she was alone, her memory of that unfortunate encounter on the road leaped into the forefront of her mind again. Sleep! She felt as if she could never sleep again.

A month before Kerry O'Neil had dropped like a meteor into the calm serenity of her life and, unmeteorlike, there he had stayed. He was engaged in a mining venture in Mexico and he had come north with an exceptionally fine collection of rock crystals which Doctor McEwan, the director of the Westcoast Museum, had purchased for his institution.

Kerry O'Neil had dark hair and tempestuous eyes that could kindle or chill with extraordinary swiftness, and a knack of blundering his way out of the near-catastrophes his impulsive nature was forever getting him into.

There was romance and color and life and an amazing audacity in Kerry O'Neil. One sensed it as one senses heat in a flame. He had done everything, seen everything, been everywhere.

There was nothing definite between them. Gail had not even admitted to herself that there ever would be anything definite between them. Her life had been cast in sheltered places; merely the grandeur of the past colored her work at the museum and constantly she asked herself if there was in her that which could match the clean white flame that was Kerry O'Neil.

But as she tossed on the bed and stared into the darkness which pressed like leaden weights on her eyeballs, she wondered if the flame were as clean and white as she had believed.

That incredible scene on the highway: Kerry, with a handkerchief over his face and a pistol in his hand, and that suave plump little man at his mercy! What madness had driven him to it?

A clock somewhere in the house struck two . . . and then the half-hour. Still sleep eluded her! Her nerves were on fire. The booming of the surf, magnified by the stillness of the night, rolled up to her charged, it seemed, with sullen threat.

Three o'clock.

The room was stifling. She felt as if she was suffocating. Heat passed over her in waves. Then her body chilled and a sense of dread, arising

she knew not whence, took possession of her. The atmosphere of the room, the very stillness of the night, seemed alive, tingling with it. Her body was drenched with perspiration. Barely could she repress an impulse to scream. Trembling, she fumbled for the switch and snapped on the light.

The friendly glow comforted her. She slipped out of bed, got into a robe and slippers, and looked at herself in the mirror of the dressing-table. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes were leaden. She opened the French window and passed out onto the balcony.

A cool breeze freshened her. She shivered a little. The gardens were almost entirely in shadow now, the moon having descended far in the west.

The front of the house, too, was enshrouded in darkness and as she stared along the lean façade, her fevered imagination found it strangely altered.

Something cold and sinister lay upon it, like the shadow of a malign hand. Within her breast stirred again that dread which had come upon her in the bedroom.

SUDDENLY, her body grew tense and still. On the circular driveway which surrounded the lawn near where it entered, the main drive there yet remained a pool of moonlight.

Across this pool of light had darted the figure of a tall, heavily built man.

In a flash he had vanished down the tree-bordered drive.

Gail shrank back against the adobe wall in the grip of a dread she could not understand. It seemed to encompass her, as a swamp miasma rising up at her feet would have done. It was on her lips, in her throat, choking her, pressing around her pounding heart.

Who could the man be? What was he doing in the grounds? His movements had been highly suspicious. Should she rouse the household?

Perhaps her overwrought imagination had received her. Certainly she had seen the man, but might not he be connected with the place and have the right to be down there even at that hour in the morning? She did not know what to think or what to do.

In perplexity, Gail reentered the bedroom. Sleep was further away from her than ever. The room stifled her again, and that unaccountable dread tightened in her breast. Some inward sense impelled her to action. She must do *something*. What?

Opening the door, she peered up and down the landing, light from the bedroom streaming past her. There was no sound, merely that oppressive stillness which was like a knife-blade on her raw nerves.

Gail went to the head of the stairs and peered down into the darkness below. She could see nothing, hear nothing. The house was like a tomb. She forced herself to descend the carpeted staircase. On the bottom step she stopped and listened.

No sound!

And then, to her horror, she saw a tall figure standing motionless in the hall.

Her legs threatened to collapse beneath her. A scream rose to her lips; she suppressed it. By an immense effort of will she compelled herself to whisper:

"Who's there?"

No response. She waited, sick with terror. The figure did not move. And then she gave a little hysterical laugh of relief. It was one of the suits of armor she had noticed upon entering the house. The clock struck four. Its strokes were like the strokes of doom.

Gail crept around the newel-post and beheld a thin line of light against

the floor toward the lower end of the hall. The library door was there, she remembered.

What did the light mean? Was the colonel in the room? Or had he and Dimity retired, leaving the light on?

Either theory was easily conceivable; but there was also the theory that someone who had no right was responsible for the light. Had she the courage to find out?

Nerving herself for the ordeal, Gail crept forward. She came to the door, opened it, and peered into the room.

The center of the library was flooded with light from the hanging lamp; the walls were in shadow. There seemed to be no one in the room.

Yes, there was!

A cry smothered in her throat. She took a step forward and stopped. Her blood was like ice in her veins.

A man lay on the floor with his head and body in the shadows beyond the hearth, and his feet in the light in front of it. His legs were bound with a curtain cord.

Gail ran forward. A little scream broke from her lips. She dropped onto her knees beside the still figure on the floor.

It was Colonel Conniston, and he was dead.

CHAPTER IV

MADNESS

GAIL shrank away from the body with horror written in her face. She put her hands to her eyes to shut out the sight of it. Nearly a minute passed before she could bear to look at it, to touch it.

The body was cold. There were dark marks on the throat. The face had a swollen, purplish appearance. Pajamas and a quilted silk dressing gown covered the body. A leather slipper was on the right foot; the other lay nearby. The eyes were fixed and staring, and they were a little amazed in their expression as if, in his last moments, Colonel Conniston had solved the riddle of life and death. The curtain cord which bound his legs was tightly knotted.

A passionate indignation swept over Gail. She had met Colonel Conniston for the first time only a few hours before, but notwithstanding his extraordinary outburst of temper she had sensed in him qualities which had endeared him to her.

And now he was dead!

Gail got up, white-lipped and trembling. She must rouse Dimity and Mrs. Wessels. And then? The police, of course! Her eyes ran around the room, rested upon the vault door. It was shut. Were the intaglios safe?

Just then she heard a tinkle of sound at the door which led into the hall. It stopped. Gail hesitated for an instant; then she sprang forward, caught the handle, and jerked the door open. To her astonishment Dimity tumbled headlong into the room.

"Dimity!" she cried. "Colonel Conniston"—she indicated the still figure on the floor—"he's dead! Somebody has been here!"

The little man's precipitous entrance into the room had sent him to his knees. He crouched there, staring fixedly at his dead master. There was a queer, inarticulate agony in his puckered face. Terror crept into his eyes and he crawled forward until he could touch the still face and run his hands over the cold body. Gail could not bear to look upon his grief.

Then he stood up. His black button eyes were hard with suspicion.

"You found him?" he whispered. "Like this?"

"Yes. Just now, Dimity. I couldn't

sleep. I came down. What were you doing out there? Why didn't you come in?"

He stared at her piteously for a moment. The suspicion died away in his eyes.

"Listening. . . . watching," he whispered. "I thought I heard something and I came down." He seemed to address some inward accusing voice rather than the girl who was studying him so closely.

"Do you know who did this?"

He gave her an odd, terrified look.

At that moment there came a step in the hall, the door opened, and Mrs. Wessels, huge and fantastic in hair curlers and muddy gray dressing gown, rolled in. She looked at the figure on the floor and screamed. Her body rocked to and fro and, thinking she was going to fall, Gail ran to her side and put her arm around her.

"He's dead, Miss 'Ollister!" the woman moaned.

Gail nodded. Her own eyes were blurred with tears. She led Mrs. Wessels out of the room, into the kitchen, and deposited her in a chair. Hurrying back to the library, she found Dimity still staring at his master with terrified eyes.

"Is there a telephone?" she asked sharply.

"We are too far out, Missie."

"Had the colonel a car?"

"Yes."

"You must drive in to Ocean Strand and get the police."

"Yes."

"At once, Dimity!"

Gail's peremptory tone had the desired effect. He bobbed his head, hurried across the room, and drew aside the Oriental draperies which concealed the French window. The window was bolted. He drew the bolt, opened the window, and vanished into the darkness.

Gail went to the window. It opened upon a small ornamental iron balcony. Across the balcony blew a stiff breeze from the ocean and Gail was reminded of the scantiness of her attire. She drew her gown more closely around her and as she did so she remembered that Dimity had been fully dressed. Did this mean that he had not yet retired for the night? It must! What was he doing up?

Just then a car whizzed past the window, swung sharply to the left. Evidently, Dimity knew how to drive.

Gail was about to close the window when she heard a rustle in the small shrubbery outside. Instantly she was on the alert.

"Who's there?" she cried apprehensively.

THERE was silence for a moment. And then a man rose up out of the shadows below, set his lean brown hands upon the balcony rail, and grinned up at her.

"Hello, Gail!"

"Kerry!" For a second or so Gail's heart seemed to stop. "What are you doing here?" she whispered.

"Nosing around," was the casual reply. "Anything wrong? You look kind of peaked."

She could not answer him.

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

He vaulted the rail and stood before her, tall and lithe and brown. His crisp hair was uncovered and twinkling lights were in his dark eyes. There was something about him that suggested a finely tempered sword. His ears lay close to his well-shaped head. Their delicate smallness was distinctive. He sobered when he saw the terror in Gail's eyes.

"What's wrong?"

He pushed past her into the room.

"Good God!" she heard him cry.

He dropped onto his knees and ran his hands over the body. Gail compelled herself to watch him. The swift movements of his hands

fascinated her. Then they grew still and he stared down at the set face beneath him. Gail edged nearer. His mouth was white and hard; his hands were clenched. Suddenly, he whipped a knife out of his pocket and slashed at the cord that bound the legs of the dead man.

"Kerry! You shouldn't have done that!"

He looked up at her. "Why not?"

"Dimity has gone for the police. They'll want everything left as it was when I found him. I haven't touched a thing."

Kerry stood up. "I am always doing the darn-fool thing. I didn't think. It hurt me to see him lying there like that! Poor old chap! What happened? Who did it?"

Gail shuddered. "I don't know. He must have heard someone and come down."

Kerry nodded. "And tackled the man, I suppose. Just like him to do it. And his heart stopped. I wonder who it was! I'll bet a dollar he was after the intaglios!" Kerry wheeled excitedly toward the vault.

"Kerry!"

"What's wrong?"

"Don't touch that vault!"

"You talk like Sherlock Holmes!" he grinned. "Fingerprints, eh? I ought to have known *that!*"

Gail quietly closed the hall door.

"Why did you do that?" His voice had sharpened.

"The housekeeper is in the kitchen."

"What about her, Gail?"

She looked at him steadily. "What are you doing here, Kerry?"

"I heard someone scream."

"Mrs. Wessels, I suppose. What were you doing in the grounds?"

He grinned sheepishly. "I followed you."

"You followed me!" incredulously.

"Yes. I wondered what you wanted with old Conniston. You didn't tell me you were coming here. I figured on seeing him myself again this morning, too. There's a summerhouse along the cliff, the night was dry, and I thought I might as well bunk out there, since the Colonel hadn't offered me a bed." Kerry glanced sadly at the still figure. "Poor old chap! I believe he meant to, but we were raging at each other and I left in a hurry."

Gail sighed. It was these irrationalities of his that drew him to her.

"Will you be serious, Kerry?" she cried distressfully. "You are all mixed up in this affair, yet you don't seem to realize your position. You've simply got to explain things: your presence here; that dreadful hold-up on the road. I can't understand you!"

The distress in her voice touched him. He caught her hands in his and drew her near to him.

"I've got a bushel of things to explain, Gail," he said earnestly. "You must think me every kind of a fool. A crook maybe; everything that's rotten. I certainly made an ass of myself last night, in more ways than one. But I can't tell you about it now. I heard someone in the grounds a while ago. Didn't think much of it, then—none of my business—but I'd better take a look around."

Gail nodded slowly. "Perhaps you had, Kerry. You'll be careful, won't you?"

He pressed her hands and vanished through the window.

Gail stood thinking. She was capable of an immense faith in those who were dear to her, and she recklessly placed all of it in Kerry O'Neil, whose antecedents were as vaguely spectacular as a comet's tail. She was sure that he would explain everything to her: the hold-up, his interview with Colonel Conniston, their quarrel, and his connection with the famous intaglios. Would the police believe him?

Kerry had a way of making the

fantastic sound reasonable, but to expect him to account for his quarrel with Conniston, the hold-up (should he by any chance be identified as its perpetrator), and his presence in the grounds at the time of the murder, without arousing the suspicions of the police, was to expect the impossible.

Indeed, if the two men Kerry had held up should recognize him, the case against him would be regarded as complete. That would mean a charge of murder. Gail could not see it any other way and she went sick with horror at the thought. There was but one thing to do: Kerry's presence in the grounds and his return to the library must be concealed at all costs!

HAVING come to this decision, Gail passed into the hall, intending to go upstairs and dress; but the light in Mrs. Wessels' kitchen suggested the housekeeper to her as a fertile source of information, and she went there instead. Mrs. Wessels, still white-faced and shaky, was sitting at the table with an innocent-looking glass in her hand. She set it down with a bang.

"Only a drop o' peppermint, Miss 'Ollister," she explained. "It always settles me. Will you 'ave some?"

Gail shook her head. For the moment she was at a loss for words.

"Poor Colonel Conniston!" Mrs. Wessels went on sorrowfully. He was *that* good to me! A bit sharp of his tongue, mebbe, but a gallant gentleman for all that! Who do you think did it?"

Gail ignored the question. "Had the colonel any visitors last night?"

"He had that! Three of 'em. A young, dark, tallish chap came first. Dimity let 'im in. And a nice way 'e talked to the colonel, too!"

Gail's heart gave a leap. "What do you mean, Mrs. Wessels?"

"Well, I was a-coming downstairs and I heard them 'aving 'igh words. The colonel told the young chap to get out, and the young chap up and told 'im he'd see 'im in the 'ot place first."

Gail shuddered. "Who were the other two?"

"Parties by the name of Gill, Miss 'Ollister. Just as I got to the bottom of the stairs there came a rapping at the front door. I went myself and just as I got the door open if this young chap didn't come running out of the library and shove past me, 'is face as red as a beet, and rush off down the drive! I showed the other two in to the colonel. And nice gentlemen they was, too, though one of 'em looked as if 'e never 'ad much to say for 'imself."

Gail pondered these revelations pessimistically. Suddenly a thought struck her.

"Is there anybody else attached to the house but you and Dimity?"

"No, Miss 'Ollister. We manage nicely, Dimity and me. He's real 'andy for all of 'is queer ways."

"Is there anybody living or camping on the grounds?"

"No, indeed!"

This was relieving to Gail. It meant that the man she had seen slinking across the pool of moonlight had no business to be there. And since it was not Kerry whom she had seen—he was heavier in build that O'Neil—it was extremely probable that it was the man who had killed Colonel Conniston and whom Kerry had heard in the grounds.

While Gail was dressing in her room she continued to ponder upon what Mrs. Wessels had told her. Who were these two men, the Gills, whom the housekeeper had admitted into the colonel's library? Gail furrowed her brow and paused, chamois in hand. Colonel Conniston had said he had been offered three hundred

thousand for the intaglios that very night! The Gills? Of course! Now she remembered. Conrad Gill was the well-known Los Angeles diamond broker. And who were the two men Kerry had stopped on the road? The Gills, of course! Kerry, then, had been after the intaglios!

Gail glanced at her wrist watch. A quarter of five! Dimity should be back with the police any minute. Suddenly, her heart grew cold with fresh terror. The reflection had presented a new angle of the situation. Kerry was searching the grounds. He would never think of the danger he was in. He would almost certainly run into their arms! Why hadn't she thought of this before? She must find him! Warn him! Had she time?

Flying downstairs, she rushed into the library. Apparently everything was as she had left it. As she passed through the window onto the ornamental balcony she saw the flush of dawn on the crest of the ridge. Trees and shrubbery were taking on definite forms and outlines. Presently, it would be light. In the meantime she must find Kerry. But the grounds were extensive and thickly wooded and she hadn't the slightest idea where or how to begin.

"What shall I do?" she whispered.

SHE thought of calling to him. No! That would be courting disaster. Panic began to unnerve her and she stared wildly into the dimness ahead. She was on the point of climbing over the rail when her problem was suddenly solved by the appearance of Kerry from behind a hydrangea bush.

"Hello, Gail!" he greeted her. "Nothing doing. Couldn't find a thing."

She motioned to him to be silent.

"What's wrong, honey? Still sleuthing?"

Before she could stop him he had vaulted the rail and was standing before her.

"Kerry! Be serious, please!" he pleaded. "The police are here—will be any minute! They mustn't suspect that you came back! You've *got* to get away!"

He looked at her incredulously. "To hear you talk anyone would think I killed old Conniston!"

"The police will say you did, unless you get away now! Don't you understand the position you are in?"

He caught her hand in fingers of steel. "Good God! *You* don't think *I* did it?"

"Don't be absurd! Just think for a moment! You quarreled with Colonel Conniston?"

"Yes."

"Mrs. Wessels overheard you. Perhaps Dimity did, too."

"He did, if you mean that little old manservant. He was listening outside the library door when I rushed out. I tumbled over him. Queer chap!"

"Very well. Think of the rest of it. You have spent the night in the grounds, uninvited, and you stopped the Gills with a pistol on a public highway."

"It wasn't loaded."

"You must have been mad."

"I was. I am. There's madness in my blood. My father lost his life in Thibet. My grandfather died under Garibaldi. Uncle Dick perished on Everest. A Kerry O'Neil fought the Spaniards under Drake. Mad blood, Gail! Go on."

"Hero blood, Kerry. Why did you stop the Gills?"

"I thought they had the intaglios. Half of 'em happen to be mine."

"Yours!"

"It's a long story."

"Will the police believe it?"

Kerry meditated. "Probably not," he admitted seriously. "I guess you

are right. You are—always. I'm an ass and I'm in a devil of a mess! It all depends on whether the Gills recognize me or not."

"They are not going to recognize you, Kerry!"

"How do you know?"

"You are going away, now! You are going straight back to Los Angeles! When the police look you up you will admit your interview with Colonel Conniston and nothing else. *Nothing else!* Not a word about the hold-up or your coming back here!"

Kerry grinned down at her. "You talk like a slick lawyer, Gail! But I guess I'll stay and face it out."

She caught him furiously by the arm. "You shall not! You are going now!"

"And leave you to face it alone! I guess not!" His dark eyes sparkled.

Gail was desperate. She seized the lapels of his coat and tugged at them in a frenzy. "Kerry, you must! I can't bear the thought of them taking you!"

He caught her hands almost savagely. "Does it matter that much? Do you really care whether they take me or not?"

She tried to draw away from him, but he held her hands fast. The poignant look in her eyes must have given him his answer. Just then they heard the roar of a car in the drive. Gail pushed him toward the rail.

"Kerry!" she sobbed. "They are here! Oh, do go!"

"No."

"You can't help me by staying. They'll arrest you!" Her voice rose hysterically. "If you don't, you'll make it all the worse for me!"

There came an authoritative hammering on the front door. Mrs. Wessels' slippered feet clap-clapped up the hall. Gail's face was piteous in its distress.

"If you put it that way!" he cried in an agony of indecision.

"I do, Kerry! I do!"

He made up his mind suddenly. "All right! But I'll stick around here. I won't go up north. Don't worry! They'll not catch me unless I want 'em to!"

Gail had to be content with this. "If it is safe, I'll come down to the beach tonight."

"Better not!"

"I shall! Go, Kerry!"

He slipped over the rail and vanished. Voices sounded in the hall. Heavy feet hurried toward the library. Gail drew back into the room. The half of the window which was closed rattled in the breeze, and Gail was moved to shut and bolt the window lest Kerry in a fit of reckless obstinacy should take it into his head to return. She drew the curtains, steadied them, dropped into a chair, and composed herself.

The door opened and three men entered the room.

CHAPTER V

BOLTED DOORS.

GAIL never had encountered the police in their official capacity before, and her heart was thumping mightily as she rose to her feet. Nevertheless, she met the three men with a coolness that astonished herself. One of them, a thin, dark bearded man with a satchel, dropped onto his knees beside the body and began to examine it with the swift competence of the physician. The other two had an air of grim authority about them which Gail had not expected to encounter in Ocean Strand.

The senior of the two was a thickly set man with a square chin and hard and cold humorless eyes that constantly endeavored to estimate the potentialities of everything and

everyone they rested upon. Even as at this moment they were endeavoring to estimate the potentialities of Gail Hollister, and to determine her relation to the sequence of events which had terminated in the death of the man on the floor. The other was somewhat nondescript in type. He had a long, narrow face and sullen eyes; and while his bearing was official and authoritative it seemed less instinctive than reflected.

There was no sign of Dimity. Mrs. Wessels hovered uncertainly in the background.

The senior officer stared at the body for a moment; then he addressed Gail curtly.

"I am Bartlett of the sheriff's office. We got a long-distance call to the effect that a Colonel Conniston had been killed at the Casa de Ayer. Did you call us?"

"Why, no!" Gail exclaimed in surprise. "Aren't you from the village?"

"The village? Certainly not! We are from the sheriff's office at St. James. Who called us?"

"I don't know," Gail said in bewilderment. "Dimity, Colonel Conniston's servant, drove into the village. Perhaps the officer there phoned you."

"No, he didn't." Bartlett indicated the body. "Who found him?"

Gail shuddered. "I did."

"What time?"

"About four."

"How long after that was it before your man left for the village?"

Gail thought. "About fifteen minutes."

Bartlett pondered this. "Four-fifteen," he muttered. "What time did we get that call, Decker?" addressing the other deputy.

"Four-five exactly," the man returned with impressive promptness.

Gail looked at her wrist watch. "It's four-fifty-five now," she said suggestively.

"Four-fifty-six," Bartlett corrected her. His cold blue eyes scanned her narrowly. "Are you Conniston's daughter?"

"No. I was sent down by the Westcoast Museum at Los Angeles to help Colonel Conniston catalog his antiques. I only got here late last night."

"Antiques, eh! Your name?"

Gail told him.

The doctor looked up just then, having finished his examination of the body.

"He has been dead about four hours, I should think," the doctor stated. "He had a valvular lesion of the heart. There are finger-marks on his throat. He must have been in violent struggle with someone. It finished him."

Bartlett nodded and turned to Gail again. "Tell me everything you know about it."

Gail faced him coolly. "I don't know anything about it," she said steadily. "I came down from my room about four o'clock and found him lying there."

Bartlett was silent for a moment, but he did not remove his eyes from Gail. She grew uneasy beneath their steady scrutiny.

"Why did you come down from your room?"

"I couldn't sleep. I had a feeling there was something wrong and I got up. I just had to get up. It was this sense of something being wrong that brought me down." Bartlett looked unconvinced and Gail added hurriedly: "And I saw a man in the garden."

"A man!" Bartlett appreciated the definite. "When? Where?"

Gail described the relation of the balcony to her room and the gardens below and explained how she had

seen the figure of a man flit across the pool of moonlight.

"Can you describe him?"

"He was tall and rather heavily built. I might recognize him if I saw him again."

"Hm! You might! Why couldn't you sleep?"

Gail felt her color rising. "What are you driving at, Mr. Bartlett?"

The cold eyes flickered a little. "The truth. Did you leave everything as you found it?"

"I did!"

JUST then a car whirred up the drive and stopped in front of the house. Someone pounded on the front door and Mrs. Wessels bustled out to answer the summons. A moment later a stoutish, red-faced man in a semi-official khaki uniform entered the room, followed by Dimity. The officer's optimistic countenance fell at sight of the deputy and his man, Decker.

"Hello, Bartlett!" he grumbled. "Beat me to it, eh? I was out rounding up a couple of drunks in Dillon's pool hall. Bad business, this! Great old scout, the colonel! Get onto anything?"

"Peters," Bartlett acknowledged briefly.

He shrugged grimly and into his hard, cold eyes there came an expression as near to humor as Gail was ever to see in them. Then he stated the situation as he understood it and repeated the little that Gail had told him. Incidentally, he made it clear that the case was a county affair, that it was in his hands, and that Deputy Sheriff Bartlett was unaccustomed to interference of any sort.

Bartlett knelt by Conniston's body and examined the finger-marks in the fleshy neck. Then he looked at the hands, felt in the pockets of the dressing-gown, and contemplated the severed curtain cord which had bound the legs. He did not speak. A minute passed. The atmosphere of the room grew taut, like a violin string. Gail felt as if it were tightening around her throat, cutting into the flesh, strangling her. Mrs. Wessels rolled her vast head uncertainly. Terrified bewilderment haunted Dimity's black button eyes.

Suddenly, the deputy looked up at Gail.

"Was this cord around his legs when you found him?"

"Yes," Gail admitted unthinkingly.

"Why did you cut it?"

The question came like a shot. Gail trembled, but she held her head up. No sooner had she made the admission than she realized the consequences of Kerry's thoughtless act. Bartlett had assumed that *she* had cut the cord! She dare not contradict herself. She must maintain the assumption.

"You knew he was dead," Bartlett went on sternly. "Why didn't you leave him alone?"

Gail dropped her eyes. "I am sorry. He looked so pitiful lying there like that. Does it matter?"

Bartlett grunted and stood up as if it were of no great consequence. But Gail had the uneasy feeling that she hadn't heard the last of it.

The deputy crossed to the vault. It was immersed in shadow. An electric globe hung in front of it and he turned it on, flooding the door with light. He inspected the handle and the door closely for a minute or so; then he tried the handle. The door was locked.

Moving to the window, he drew back the Oriental draperies which concealed it, and the early morning sunlight poured into the sombre room. The glass and the bolt held his thoughtful attention for several minutes. He then drew back the bolt, opened the window, and

stepped onto the balcony. His eyes dropped to the rail, to the earth below. There were no footprints. Decker followed him onto the balcony and Bartlett spoke to him in low, curt tones. They reentered the library, but Decker continued on into the hall and disappeared.

Bartlett now turned his attention to the library table. It was long and narrow, of oak, and dark with age, and its massive legs were exquisitely carved. Gail had placed it as seventeenth century French. Upon the table lay a small Venetian hand mirror, a lens such as jewelers and antiquaries use, a bronze inkstand by Cellini, writing materials, and a writing pad with bronze corners.

Behind the table stood a swivel-chair upholstered in leather. Two other chairs were drawn up in front of the table. Behind, and a little to the right of these two chairs, was the door of the vault. Later on, the setting of the room as it was at that time was to become vivid in the memory of every one there.

Bartlett dropped into the chair behind the table and pointed to one of the other two.

"Sit there, Miss Hollister."

Gail resented his tone; she obeyed, nevertheless. The sunlight streamed full upon her copper-red head. Her heart was thumping furiously, but she eyed the deputy coolly.

He lit a cigar.

"Have you any idea who killed Conniston?"

"Certainly not."

"Care to take a guess at the motive?"

Gail stiffened. "Why do you question me?" she demanded. "I met Colonel Conniston for the first time last night. I don't know any more about his affairs than you do."

"Answer the question."

Gail's dark eyes flashed. "I don't know of any reason why anyone should kill Colonel Conniston. I thought him a delightful old gentleman."

Bartlett drew on his cigar thoughtfully. "If you were a crook," he went on, "would you call this a likely looking crib?"

"I might," Gail admitted.

"Why?"

"Well, there's the Conniston intaglios."

"What are they?"

Gail explained.

"Conniston showed them to you, eh? Did he tell you what they are worth?"

"Colonel Conniston said he was offered three hundred thousand dollars for them last night."

Bartlett whipped out his cigar. "By whom?"

"Conrad Gill, the Los Angeles broker, I believe."

"Old Gill, eh? Well, he's the boy with the money. You saw Conniston return the stones to the vault?"

"I did."

"And lock it?"

"Yes."

Bartlett grunted. "My bet is they are not there now. Do you know if anyone else called on Conniston last night?"

Gail's hands clenched beneath the table. This was the question she had dreaded more than any other. She wondered if the color were receding in her cheeks, if those hard cold eyes read her distress.

"I believe Mrs. Wessels said there was someone else. A young man, wasn't it?" she calmly inquired of the housekeeper.

"A young man, Miss 'Ollister, and a queer one at that, as I told you!"

"Queer? What do you mean?" Bartlett rapped out.

Finding herself the centre of interest, Mrs. Wessels instantly became conscious of her nightdress, her dressing-gown, and her hair cur-

lers, and threatened to become inarticulate. Bartlett was relentless, however.

"Come, come!" he said curtly. "What about this young man?"

Mrs. Wessels drew her robes around her and after one or two false starts repeated substantially what she had said to Gail.

"Ever see this man O'Neil before?"

"No, sir, I 'aven't."

"Have you?" addressing Dimity.

The little man's black button eyes widened fearfully. He stared at Bartlett as if he did not understand the question. There was tragedy in his puckered face and the conviction that he knew something of the death of his master entered Gail's mind.

"No," he said in his thin voice, "I never saw him before."

Bartlett looked at him narrowly. "Sure?"

Dimity seemed surprised at the question.

"Yes, I'm sure," he said gently.

Bartlett meditated. "Had Conniston any relations?"

"There's Mr. Norman Stark, his nephew, sir," Dimity went on vaguely. "He lives in Los Angeles. He's the only one as I know of."

"Me, too," Mrs. Wessels echoed.

"How long have you been with Colonel Conniston, Dimity?"

"How long?" The little gnome-like face grew more puckered than ever. "I can't remember things the way I used to. It must be a matter of thirty, mebbe forty years. I ain't sure. Things are dim—misty. I was all over the world with the colonel: India, China, Thibet, the south seas. I can't remember them all."

His voice seemed to die away into nothing; his brown eyes were humid with tears.

"I loved the colonel like a brother!" he whispered.

There was silence for a moment.

"Any idea who killed him?" Bartlett pursued.

"Would I be holding back if I had?" the little man cried. Then, with astonishing vigor: "If ever I get my hands on him!"

His bony fingers curled expressively until they were like talons, and a look of ferocity twisted his little nub of a face.

BARLETT seemed satisfied, but again Gail had that impression of depth in Dimity.

Just then Decker reentered the library. Gail had taken an instinctive dislike to the man and his reappearance troubled her vaguely. He bent confidentially over Bartlett's shoulder and spoke to him at length in tones so low that Gail could not catch a word of what he said. Bartlett started suddenly, whipped the cigar out of his mouth, vehemently replaced it, then he pushed Decker aside and looked at Dimity again.

"When you left the house an hour ago, which way did you go out?"

"That way," Dimity said gently, and he pointed to the French window through which streamed the morning sunlight.

"Was it bolted?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, yes. The colonel was always very particular about having all the doors and windows locked and bolted, 'count of his antiques. All the outside doors have bolts as well as locks on 'em."

"And so far as you know all the other outside doors and windows were bolted on the inside at that time."

"Yes, sir."

"Including the front door?"

"Yes."

Bartlett's eyes darted to Gail again.

"Have you any idea how the man who killed Conniston got in and got out?"

"No," said Gail.

"You haven't thought about it, eh?"

"No."

Bartlett leaned over the desk toward her. There was something in his expression that terrified the girl.

"Did you bolt that window before Dimity unbolted it?"

Gail's heart grew cold, but she answered steadily: "Certainly not! Why should I?"

"You saw Dimity unbolt it?"

"Yes."

"You bolted it after he left?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Gail began to tremble. "The window rattled." Thank heaven it had!

"Rattled, eh!" The inflection was sardonic. "Very well. Now this is important. You have heard Dimity's statement to the effect that all the doors and windows were fastened last night and that each outside door is fitted with a bolt as well as with a lock. This statement is correct.

"Decker has been through the house and examined every door and window in it, including those in the cellar. All are bolted with the exception of that one there which I unbolted myself a few minutes ago. If Conniston's murderer got in and then got out of the house, how do you account for every window and door in it being bolted on the *inside* at the time, since you found the body?"

Gail did not grasp what lay behind the question. Her mind merely seized upon the absurdity of the statement that *every* means of exit from the house was bolted on the inside, when someone had certainly passed through one of them.

"There must be a door or window open or broken in somewhere," she said positively. "A man can't pass through a bolted door or window without first unbolting it. Mr. Decker must be mistaken."

"Not on your life," Decker said doggedly. "I've been all over the house. You know me, chief!"

Bartlett said nothing. He merely lit another cigar and waited, his eyes still on Gail. Decker began to grin, a queer, lip-curling grin with a malevolent significance hidden behind it. The room was tense and still. And then, in a flash, Gail perceived that they were waiting for her to speak. What had she to tell them? The answer came with a terrible swiftness and she grew numb with horror. They suspected those who were in the house. Dimity, Mrs. Wessels, herself—especially herself!

Panic threatened her; she fought it down. How *did* that man get out? He couldn't have passed through a bolted door. That was absurd—insane. They were waiting for her to speak. She must say something.

"Perhaps he got out after Mrs. Wessels let you in. He may—he *must* have been in hiding—somewhere."

"Mrs. Wessels rebolted the front door after admitting us and again after admitting Peters and Dimity," Bartlett stated dispassionately. "It is bolted now."

"Force of 'abit," Mrs. Wessels whispered. "The colonel would 'ave it bolted."

"It won't do, Miss Hollister," Bartlett drawled.

There was silence for a moment.

"What do you mean?"

The deputy leaned nearer. "Conniston may have been killed by someone in the house, but I figure that the man who did the killing was let in and then let out."

"By someone in the house?"

"Exactly."

Gail was white to the lips. "You think I let him in?"

"I mean just what I said. No more yet."

Gail felt as if she would faint; desperately she fought for clear-headedness.

"I am under suspicion, then, more so than the others!" Her mind grasped the single weakness in Bartlett's theory. "You have forgotten one thing. If I, or anyone else, let this man in, would I have bolted the door or window after he had gone?"

Bartlett's eyes flickered a little. "The crook always slips up somewhere. I never knew it to fail. Don't miss the main point: A man cannot pass through a bolted door or window without first unbolting it. We have got to be logical in my business."

He got to his feet suddenly, picked up the severed curtain cord which had bound Conniston's legs, and thrust it into Gail's face.

"Did you cut this?"

GAIL stared at the cord in terror. This meant a lie! How many more would she have to utter before she and Kerry were safely out of this dreadful morass! The strength was ebbing from her body. She could not hold out much longer. She was in a net and Bartlett was dragging her in.

"Yes, I cut it."

"What with?"

What had Kerry used? His knife, of course.

"A knife."

"Where is it?"

She was trapped. "I don't know! I don't know!"

"You must know."

The last thread of her self-control snapped. "I don't know, I tell you! I don't know!" she sobbed hysterically. "It's around somewhere! I don't know anything about it. Can't you leave me alone!" She buried her face in her hands.

There was silence in the room again. Decker laughed, an unpleasant, nasal sound. And then Mrs. Wessels shuffled forward with the light of battle in her eyes and protectingly encircled Gail's slim shoulders with one of her mighty arms.

"Yes, dearie, he's going to leave you alone, 'e is! That for you, Mr. Detective!" And Mrs. Wessels snapped her fingers beneath Bartlett's blunt nose. "Treating a poor girl this way! And her that 'adn't a thing to do with it! And throwing mud on them as 'ave served the colonel as long as Dimity and me! A fine detective you are! Shame on you! Come on, dearie!"

Mrs. Wessels drew Gail to her feet, and with a fiery glance at the unruffled deputy who uttered not a word of protest led her out of the library and into the white-enameled sanctuary of her kitchen. She placed her tenderly in a very dilapidated and very comfortable rocking-chair and put her feet on a footstool.

"There you are! A cup of 'ot tea and a bit of toast and you'll be as right as ninepence! The idea of that man saying the things 'e did! Just give me a minute to get dressed."

Mrs. Wessels rolled out of the kitchen. She returned shortly, clad in a cotton dress, a clean apron, and minus her curling pins, and began to bustle around the kitchen in a flurry of accomplishment. Just as the kettle began to boil, Dimity crept in and quietly sat down at the table.

"After 'is stimmick, as usual!" Mrs. Wessels commented bitterly. "He'll 'ave to eat like a Christian this morning, 'e will!"

Dimity had nothing to say for himself. Gail had recovered her composure if not her peace of mind and she began to study the little man covertly. He seemed to be laboring

under a burden of fear and grief and bewilderment. Dimity knew something, she was sure. How was she going to get it out of him? Perhaps he would come to her of his own accord.

"What sort of a man is Mr. Stark, the Colonel's nephew?" Gail suddenly asked Mrs. Wessels, as the latter put the buttered toast on the table.

Mrs. Wessels started, nearly upsetting a pitcher of cream.

"Oh, 'im!" she said, with obvious reluctance. "He's all right for them as likes 'em that way!"

Gail smiled and pressed for more definite information.

Mrs. Wessels shot a doubtful look at Dimity, who had not opened his mouth since coming into the kitchen.

"He's one of them as knows what 'e wants," she proceeded diffidently, "and doesn't care 'ow he gets it—so they say!"

"So who says?"

"People, Miss 'Ollister," Mrs. Wessels said vaguely. So vaguely indeed that Gail got the impression that she was keeping something back. And then, more volubly: "Stuck-up and not so much as a good-morning to you, that's him! He 'asn't been here for a goodish bit, the colonel and him 'aving 'ad words the last time he was out."

"Words—what about?" Gail asked quickly.

"Heaven knows! Mr. Norman's one of them as 'ud quarrel with their false teeth."

(To Be Continued)

The Sign of the Sword

A young and wealthy nobleman happened to lose his way in the town in which he lived, the capital of a German province. He found himself among the winding, narrow, miserable streets of a suburb, and to escape a thundershower knocked at the door of the most decent house he could see and asked for shelter.

The door was opened by a tall man with a grim, ferocious face, who after some hesitation ushered him into a room hung with strange implements. As the young man looked about him curiously, a sword hanging on the wall dropped from its scabbard. His host started and stared at him with such a marked expression that the young man hastened to ask his name and business and why he looked at him so strangely.

"I am the public executioner," said the man sullenly, "and that which you have seen is a sure sign that one day I shall be called on to behead you with that very sword."

The intruder lost no time in getting out of this house of death, though he dismissed the omen from his mind. Shortly after, however, he engaged in a political plot, and met his death on the scaffold at the hands of this very man and with the weapon designated.

Sanson, the executioner of Paris during the revolution tells a similar story of an incident in his career, giving name and date.

A Little Learning

By JEAN ALLISTER

SARAH G. McCLOUD, the plaintiff's star witness in the case of the State of Tennessee *vs.* James Quinn, accused of the murder of Martin Weber, had occupied the witness-box for upward of two hours.

And even fortified as I was with ten years' experience in taking testimony in that dingy courtroom from all types at all speeds, my pencil could hardly keep pace with the erratic but withal most illuminating words that issued by spurts and bounds from the thin blue lips of this aged mountain woman. With a chuckle, she took a long breath and went on:

"By that time I reckon the knack I allus has o' seeing folk in Payne County killin' and stealin' musta come into his thick skull. You-all shoulda heerd him mumbling between spits o' terbaccy into the fire—a good seven feet shot at that: 'Well, this here'll be one murder old Hag McCloud'll not stick her nose into.' And there I lay all the time, gentlemen o' the jury, and any other gentlemen there be in this courtroom"—with a gesture deliberately stolen from the District Attorney—"flat on my sore stomach under the sofa watchin' him bend poor Marty's stiff carcass so that it would fit. . . ."

At this point the witness stopped abruptly to gaze into the face of the prisoner, a stocky, ape-shouldered mountaineer, seated a few yards distant by the side of his counselor, a young attorney from one of the larger cities.

Suddenly Sarah G. McCloud's bony hands, which alone proclaimed the age her expressionless face and straight back denied, began a frantic search in her voluminous ragged black skirt for some object. At the same time her shrill voice—the voice of the mountains, accustomed to calling over long spaces and echoing through the hills—addressed her daughter, who occupied one of the visitors' benches in the rear:

"Mary, ye she-devil! Give me back my snuff stick! The thing never tastes the same after ye use it. Why don't ye chew a bit o' the wood and make a brush for yoursel' and keep yer dirty paws offen mine? Hand it here now, this minute!"

And Mary, a raw-boned, angular girl of about twenty, as oblivious as her mother to surroundings and the dignity of courtrooms, screamed back:

"Yer crazy mad, Ma, I've no got it. Look in yer hat! Look in yer hat!"

And while the State and all its representatives, from the learned judge down, impatiently and disgustedly waited, and the spectators almost audibly voiced their chagrin upon thus being cheated of testimony of so gruesome a nature, Sarah G. McCloud, the State's star witness, calmly removed her faded "store" hat and secured the little bag of snuff and much chewed brush and had her "bit o' nerve tonic."

GRATEFUL at the interruption, my cramped fingers released the blunt-

ed pencil and it fell upon the stenographic notebook in my lap. Yet, this was not the first time I had closely covered page after page with her evidence. No, nor the fifth. With uncanny regularity, her ample-bosomed figure would loom before me in that crude witness-box, clad always in the black alpaca "court dress" and plush hat which, from its very angle, voiced its slight acquaintance with the sparse gray hair it covered.

How she accomplished the remarkable feat of being an eye-witness to practically every punishable crime in her county would always remain a mystery. But the fact also remained that no attorney had as yet been able to break down her testimony or prove her in the wrong. She had to her credit the arrest and conviction of some of the worst criminals in Payne and Lee Counties. She boasted, further, that her court fees as witness kept her in salt pork from year to year.

As for me, I welcomed her appearance with joy. There would be none of the monotonous routine in her case. No, indeed. Sarah G. McCloud would say what she had to say in her own way and in her own good time, or she would not say it at all. Woe betide any lawyer who attempted to hurry her or belittle her method of giving evidence!

Years ago, the judge had broken every rule of criminal procedure in her favor and, in the case at bar, early in the direct examination by the District Attorney had ruled that she be permitted to tell her story without being further molested by the frequently interposed objections of the prisoner's attorney, new to practicing before this county judge. To justify this irregularity, the judge had added that he would hear all of these objections when the witness had completed her tale, and at that time either overrule or sustain them.

As I glanced about the courtroom, a hysterical desire to giggle came over me. To my right, on the elevated platform sat the venerable judge busily writing in some sort of notebook. Stationed at their various posts, the court attendants, in tight-fitting dark blue uniforms, stood like nursery tin soldiers. The District Attorney, my employer, was aimlessly tying and untying red-taped envelopes containing legal documents which he had extracted from his briefcase, his right foot beating time on the floor with quick, impatient taps. The picked jurymen fidgeted in their seats in their efforts to retain their dignified attitudes, while the prisoner's attorney, ignorant of the position Sarah G. McCloud held in this court, looked about him in stupefied amaze and turned to his client for an explanation.

And from the mottled assembly before me, resembling for all the world the occupants of a railway station waiting-room, came the sounds of scraping feet, clearing of throats, blowing of noses and an occasional sneeze, all of which intermingled with the ticking of the large court clock on the wall opposite my desk.

Resentful eyes from every direction were focused on the calm figure in the witness-box so lazily dipping the little brush in the dark powdery mixture and inserting it beneath her upper lip.

QUICKLY I grasped my pencil. With a swift movement the faded hat had been replaced on her head, and Sarah G. McCloud was about to resume the story of how she, and she alone, had seen "Jimmie Quinn, son of his no-account father, Rat Quinn, do for Marty Weber," whose bent

dead body, fully dressed but shoeless, and partly wrapped in an old potato-sack, had been found at the bottom of the unused cistern at the rear of Weber's shack.

Closely I bent over my book determined to catch every word. One-half hour of her testimony had taught me more of the character and inner workings of the minds of the crude mountaineers, who religiously followed the queer codes handed down from generation to generation, and lived such full lives in the surrounding hills, than I could have learned from years of book study; and far more, I felt certain, than would have been revealed to me had I visited either the spots or the people she so sneeringly dismissed with a gesture or, by means of a few words, mentally dragged, living or dying, into that very courtroom.

Rubbing her stained tongue over her upper and lower lips, she took up the thread again:

"And, mind ye, all for the sum o' twenty dollars! Twenty paper dollars—and one o' them almost torn in two—that Marty got for the strip o' land by the mill pond, and which he hid in a terbaccy can and let down the old cistern by a wire. Marty himsel' showed me the money and showed me the hidin' place six months back.

"Now"—reflectively—"it do seem kinda queer, do it not, that the make-believe piece o' fur that bit o' white trash, Sally Ferguson, is wearing round her dirty neck, week days as well as Sundays, shoulda cost the very same? I'm meanin' Cy Ferguson's step-girl — not the Fergusons above me on the hill—the one that cannot milk a cow without it running from her down the road or bake a cone meal pone without gettin' it all mussed up wi' cinders."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the puzzled look that had come over the prisoner's face at the beginning of this evidence change to one of embarrassment as the name of Sally Ferguson was mentioned. Sarah G. McCloud turned away from the jurymen and spoke directly at the accused:

"An' did no one warn ye, Jimmie Quinn, that the wors' way to keep a secret or hide a crime is to tell yer steady company girl the price o' yer gifts? Did ye not know that all in Payne County knew o' the twenty paper dollars that bought the fur piece? And I'm beginnin' to think also that you musta worn the dunce-cap many a time in yer countin' class at the Pine Tree School for, to my mind, it takes little or no book learnin' to figure out that a man o' six feet, dead or alive—Marty musta been six-and-two—cannot comfortably fit into an or'inary tatty-sack even by breakin' his——"

"I object!"

The prisoner's attorney was on his feet in an instant. Every neck in that courtroom was craned. In a clear voice he addressed the judge!

"Your Honor, on behalf of my client, I object to this form of evidence and demand that the witness be questioned in the regular way."

FOR a moment or two not a sound was heard. But the customary furious explosion from Sarah G. McCloud was not forthcoming. I saw Mary, her daughter, rise to her feet and gaze at her mother with hand-shaded eyes. Even the judge's poker face allowed itself the shadow of surprise as he turned to the District Attorney. The latter, apparently sure of his case and knowing the reputation of Sarah G. McCloud for truthfulness, graciously ended his direct examination then and there and turned the witness over to the defendant's counsel.

Taken by surprise, this strange

lawyer had to think quickly to get a grip upon himself. But he was equal to the occasion. Standing directly in front of the witness-box, he looked at Sarah G. McCloud and snapped sharply:

"What were *you* doing in Martin Weber's shack at two A. M. on the night he was murdered?"

Without once glancing in his direction, the State's star witness rose and then slowly sat down again, composing herself more comfortably in the chair and spreading her full skirt carefully about her. For the second time the prisoner's attorney shouted:

"What were *you* doing in Martin Weber's shack at two A. M.?"

"Now, see heah, my new lawyer man," said Sarah G. McCloud drawlingly, "I may be old and maybe my knees do stiffen up and ache o' winter nights, but even Abe Swift, my wors' enemy, who hates me like poison, never said I was deef. No, sir. Listen to me now, who am older than yer own ma, and perhaps ye'll learn something not to be found in those heavy leather Bible-lookin' books ye lawyers allus carry about wi' ye and——"

"I simply desire an answer to my question, please," impatiently interrupted the attorney, but the witness continued as if he had never spoken:

"Off and on, for over fifteen years, my back has felt the stiffness and hardness o' the wood in this witness-chair, and my eyes have seen his hair"—indicating the judge with a wave of her right arm—"turn from black to gray. And ye'll admit that the many times I've told this court o' the killin' and stealin' that went on in my part o' the country, shoulda taught me something o' the way a case is rightfully tried. And ye be all wrong, my man, all wrong. Go back now, like a real clever lawyer man, and ask me the first question, which be —'What is yer name?'—and then the second—'Whar do ye live?' or 'How old be ye?'—and so on for quite a piece afore ye spring the killin' on me."

The judge's right hand held the uplifted mahogany gavel ready to rap forth the order for silence. But it was not necessary. The impossible had happened. Here was Sarah G. McCloud insisting upon the very formalities she had fought against so often and for so many years!

What could possibly be her object? If it were simply to gratify her love of word battles, she was doomed to disappointment, for the prisoner's attorney completely ignored the biting sarcasm and coldly complied with her wishes. I give below the queries and replies that followed as they appeared in my notebook:

Q. What is your name?

A. Sarah G.—I've ne'er been told what the "G" stood for and my mother was ne'er told afore me—McCloud.

Q. Where do you live?

A. On the line betwixt Payne County and Lee—most o' the house is in Payne County, though; jus' the kitchen and outhouse in Lee. The place wi' the lumbago medicine sign in red letters on the side o' the barn roof—to the right on the State road on yer way out o' town.

Q. What is your age?

A. Seventy-seven next Tuesday.

A gasp of astonishment could be heard throughout the room. The judge turned his head sharply to look at her and I was equally amazed. Seventy-seven! And she could stand straighter and walk farther than most youths.

Q. Can you read?

A. No. Wi' good eyes to see, what need's there to read?

Q. Can you write?

A. Not words all in a line. But you-all should see how even I can make my cross for lawyer folk at the bottom o' affidavits and sich.

Several immaterial interrogatories followed, then the defendant's counsel casually asked:

"Is it not a fact that you were at one time run out of Lee County by the White Caps as an undesirable resident?"

With one of her rare chuckles, Sarah G. McCloud called to her daughter:

"Mary, did ye hear that, now? It's yer paw he is talkin' of." Turning to her questioner, she then added: "And did no one tell ye, man, that I married the very one who led the White Caps that time, and for ten and a half years his heavy coat kept my feet warm o' cold nights?"

GRADUALLY the testimony progressed. Suddenly the suspicion that had arisen in my mind some few pages back became actual conviction. I recalled how, on former trials, her evidence had always been terse and to the point; rarely wavering from the scene of the crime itself. In this instance, she appeared to ramble on about everything and everybody except the actual killing and at no time had she completed a detailed description of what she had seen with her own eyes that night.

At last the young attorney reached his first query:

"What were you doing in Martin Weber's shack at two A. M. on the night he was murdered?"

My desk was situated a little to the rear of the witness-box on the elevated platform that also contained the jury benches and the judge's desk, and I saw the gnarled left hand of the witness nervously fingering the tarnished buckle on the back of her plush hat. But her face, excepting for a slight satirical twitching at the corners of the mouth, remained unchanged. Suddenly she threw back her head and laughed aloud.

"I'm not meaning to make fun o' you, new lawyer man, but it do strike me kinda silly to ask a woman o' my years such a dumb personal question. Now, if it were my young daughter, Mary, there ye were——"

"Yer to keep yer mouth shut about me, Ma," yelled Mary from the rear bench. "Ye know well I was ne'er to any man's house after sunset, exceptin' the time Marty had neemonia. And I tolt ye I put two big tallow candles in the front windy that time, so passin' folk could see plain I was only givin' him the pills the doctor ordered. Marty, himsel', had spoken to me o' marriage long afore that, even if he and Jimmie were fightin' for the company o' Sal — Cy Ferguson's hussy —and you-all know too——"

"Mrs. McCloud, simply reply to my question, please," the attorney broke in, trying desperately to keep a grip on his temper.

"And you-all know," Mary continued, screaming at the top of her lungs as she unwound a red woolen scarf from her long neck and waved it frantically at her mother, "this here's the only piece I ever wore, and it only left my neck the time Maizie had the quinsy. If ye smell it now, you can still smell the coal-oil they put on her throat to keep the soreness down."

The judge began to use the gavel vigorously in his attempt to bring silence and order to that courtroom, and two of the attendants walked in Mary's direction. But Mary went right on and I, fascinated, hoped she would be permitted to finish.

"You-all know that this thing's years old and I made it wi' my own hands. What's more, the wool in it didn't cost one paper dollar, let alone the twenty that piece o' rabbit tails which Sally wears that that

fool, Jimmie Quinn, sittin' up there like a log, bought for——"

"I object! I object!" The defendant's attorney was again clamoring for his rights. "And I wish to put Mrs. McCloud's daughter on the stand on behalf of my client."

"No ye don't! No ye don't!" shouted the State's star witness, rising to her feet and shaking a clenched fist at the lawyer. "For over fifteen years there's been only one court woman in the McCloud clan. And there's only goin' to be one. Do ye hear me? Mary"—angrily—"ye good-for-nothing ass, sit down and keep still. I be the court witness in this here case, and not you."

Mary sat down. But I had seen fear leap into the eyes of the aged woman as the mere suggestion that, after all these years, the thing that meant more to her than her God, the thing that kept her alive and in salt pork, would be taken from her. Shakily, she resumed her seat and put her hands over her eyes. It seemed to me, however, that she glanced through her fingers at the clock opposite and I followed her gaze. It lacked six minutes to twelve, the closing of the morning session. The court would meet again at two.

The prisoner's attorney waited a minute, then relentlessly repeated his question:

"What were *you* doing in Martin Weber's shack at two A. M. on the night he was murdered?"

To the apparent disappointment of the spectators, Sarah G. McCloud replied quietly enough:

"I allus figures one happenin' by some other happenin'. Now, that night be the night I took it into my head to go up and see Mary Snell in her leaky shack nigh on to four mile over the second hill. Mary had not made over Charlie's cot for three mornings—Charlie's her one boy—and so she sent for me, thinkin' maybe that as I was mighty quick at seein' things, I could show her where to look for the lout.

"I reached the top of the bluff a little out o' breath, but there was no lamp in Mary's window and my rap sounded emptylike through the one room. First, I rested a bit on the log near the half-full rain barrels and then went over to the bench by the back door and took a drink from the water pail wi' the gourd dipper hangin' nearby. And I must not forget to tell Mary when I see her at the Pine Tree Church Sunday that she did not let her gourd dry half long enuf—the water tasted somethin' fearful. Well, I had crost the wooden bridge and was nearin' the forked road when my eye picked out the flicker o' light near Marty's old cistern. I smiled to mysel' as I 'membered a sayin' o' my ma's which be—'Tis far better to be poor for the wealthy cannot sleep o' nights'—and reckoned Marty had left his bed to see if his twenty paper dollars were still in the terbaccy can."

FROM testimony given earlier in the trial, I recalled that it was an overturned lantern near the cistern that had guided the searchers to the edge of this unused well and to the subsequent finding of Martin Weber's body.

The witness appeared to be thinking rapidly and again I saw her eyes lift to the clock. However, she proceeded:

"But I smelt a rat when I got closer and saw a second flicker o' light in the back room o' the shack, for Marty was ne'er the kind who would let two wicks burn at the one time, and then——"

A fit of coughing at this point shook the aged shoulders and she almost bent double in the paroxysm. Ere she could gain control of herself

the noon hour struck and court was adjourned. On the dot of the twelfth stroke, or so it seemed to me, the coughing ceased and the State's star witness and friend of the Government calmly left the witness-box and beckoned to her daughter. The two started toward the hallway leading past the small anteroom in which my typewriter desk was situated and leading also to the street.

I saw the District Attorney approaching with quick steps. Stooping over my desk, he whispered:

"Miss Hunt, see if you can keep her in the courthouse during the lunch period. She might take it into her head to go home and we have no other eye-witness, you know."

I forced my way through the mob in the narrow hallway and reached Mary's side, wondering what I could say to hold her and her mother, who was already some distance beyond my door. Suddenly I remembered Sarah G. McCloud's "book" of which she was so proud.

It was composed of leaves made from square pieces of white oilcloth, stitched with red cord through the centre. On every page had been sewed buttons — buttons of all shapes and colors. Each leaf represented a court year in Sarah G. McCloud's life and every button marked a crime. A black shoe button was always a murder. Thus this aged mountain woman kept track of her appearances as witness to the various crimes committed in her county. The book never left her bosom day or night.

"Mary," I eagerly called, placing my hand on her arm, "the last time your mother was in court she promised to tell me about some of the buttons on the pages of her cloth-book covering the years before I was given my position here. Do you think you two could eat your luncheon in my room, where your mother could rest and talk to me? I really would love to listen. Call her, will you, please, Mary?"

A grateful smile answered my request—a smile that would have been really attractive were it not for the snuff-stained teeth. We had almost reached the doorway of my room and I still held onto the girl's arm. Mary craned her neck to discover the whereabouts of her mother and then called loudly:

"Hey, Ma, come back here. I've somethin' to tell."

Sarah G. McCloud grunted some reply, but soon she appeared and the three of us entered my little room together. To me, Mary's mother looked her years more that minute than she had at any time during the trial, but her shrewd eyes—the eyes that one criminal had said, after her evidence had convicted him, "Would still be seein' things after her bones rotted"—lighted up with pleasure when she learned of my interest in her "book."

And while I munched sandwiches and sipped cup after cup of hot tea brought in from a neighboring restaurant, Sarah G. McCloud and her daughter sat on one of the waiting-benches and silently gulped down huge bites of cold corn pone and fat bacon, which the latter had brought in a pasteboard-box.

PRESENTLY the mother wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and began to fumble with the hooks on the front of her basque. From her bosom she drew forth the much soiled oilcloth book and smoothed it flat upon her knee. A small draw-string bag attached to the fly leaf, apparently containing the various types of buttons, and a threaded darning needle attracted my attention. I drew my swivel-chair closer.

As the wrinkled hand turned page after page and the hypnotic voice of

Sarah G. McCloud related hill crimes of former years, I sat spellbound and fascinated. No longer was I the reserved court stenographer to the District Attorney of this Tennessee town. With a furious angry mob of mountaineers who had taken the law into their own hands and led by Sarah G. McCloud herself, I was yelling and beating down the wooden doors of the county jail and dragging Daniel Kane, half dead from fright, to the nearest elm —"One-eyed Dan Kane, who stuck the hay fork into the back o' his woman, Lizzie, the year o' the heavy rains in Payne and Lee Counties."

And with "poor Molly, Fanny's eldest, who strangled her nameless brat because its father, Lew Cady, her cousin third removed, left the hills and her behin' him," I sat on the hard cot in one of the jail cells, and, year after year, gazed with unseeing eyes through the parallel iron bars.

With a snort of disgust, the aged woman pointed to a page containing but one or two small white buttons and jerkily explained:

"That be the time that darn fool evangelist came to the hills from up North, wi' his long words and still longer hair. Why, folk all about me were so good that year that I nearly starved for a bit o' pork. And he went to their heads like hard cider.

"That man, wi' his picher-cards and bits o' paper that only the children could read, was the cause o' the church and schoolhouse bein' built at the Pine Tree crossing and, to my way o' thinkin', he was also the cause o' most o' the young girls refusin' to work and leaving their good hill shacks for bigger but dirtier bricks in the towns. But we sure did make up for it the year that came after. You-all take a good look at that, now."

And a page almost covered with buttons of all sizes and shapes was proudly held out for my inspection. Suddenly the wrinkled hand faltered and attempted to skip a page. Sarah G. McCloud bit her thin lips and a dull flush rose to her cheeks.

Impulsively, I reached forward to turn back the leaf, at the same time exclaiming:

"Oh, what an odd red button! And right in the middle of the page, too. I'm sure *that* one has the best story of them all."

She thrust my hand from the book with an angry snarl and went right on to the next page. But the enthusiasm had left her voice and, after a short pause, she closed the book and replaced it in her basque. Quietly, she looked at me and said:

"Some day if I live long enough, young court lady wi' the funny pencil that makes such queer marks on paper, I'll tell ye the story o' that red button. No doubt ye'll think the tale the best o' the lot, but it was a mistake jus' the same."

Sarah G. McCloud then sat back and folded her arms over her ample bosom and closed her eyes. Realizing I was dismissed, I drew back my chair to the typewriter desk and entered the small stationery closet near the window. A small mirror and wash-basin had been installed in this storeroom for my own private use. I pulled the door almost shut and began to bathe my eyes with cold water. Presently a hoarse whisper reached me through the slight opening.

"Say, Ma, why don't you-all give it up and go home afore the court begins again? That new lawyer man from out o' town almost ketched ye this mornin'. Even wi' all ye know o' the ways o' the law, how can ye prove Marty's killin' when ye spent that night in yer own bed moanin' wi' the pain in yer knees? Come on, Ma, let's go."

Quick and sharp Mary's mother broke in:

"And let the county folk laugh behind my back, and think I was asleep when a murder was bein' done right under my very nose! After all these years! Mary, daughter, yer face may be mine, but yer spine is yer paw's. Keep yer seat this afternoon and yer tongue atween yer teeth, and watch yer old Ma think back on the killin's she's seen and find a way o' making that guilty Quinn squeal like a stuck pig. Sh!"

Footsteps were heard approaching and entering my room. Limply I sat on a box of court stationery, the water from my face dripping into my lap unheeded. So this was the reason Sarah G. McCloud had dragged the evidence through the morning session, and had been most careful to keep the testimony away from the actual killing of Martin Weber!

I emerged from the storeroom shortly after hoping my face did not betray my newly acquired knowledge, and casually performed various routine duties. The remaining bench in my room now contained three immaterial character witnesses, who gazed furtively at the aged woman opposite in awe. Although their testimony had disclosed the fact that they had known Sarah G. McCloud practically all their lives and at the present time lived within hailing distance of her back door, she sat straight as a ramrod and looked through and past them without the slightest sign of recognition. It was my firm belief that, within the walls of a courthouse, Sarah G. McCloud would not have exchanged the time of day with her own mother, had she been living.

THE afternoon session would soon begin and court attendants and spectators were even then hurrying by my open door on their way to the large room at the end of the hall. The District Attorney entered with his usual quick stride and approached Mrs. McCloud. After conversing with her a minute or two, she rose and left the room, followed by Mary and the three witnesses.

My employer turned toward my desk and inquired anxiously whether I had been able to take down all of the evidence given in so irregular a manner and with so many interruptions during the direct examination at the morning session, and asked me to read from my notes several of Mrs. McCloud's statements.

As I hastened to comply with this request, I noted that his usually calm hands had removed the court calendar from my desk and were twisting it into a tight roll. Also, a pucker of doubt gradually appeared between his heavy brows as I read. In an impatient manner, he dropped the calendar and turned on his feet. Nearing the door, he flung over his shoulder:

"We shall have to bring out real facts on the cross-examination. There's nothing definite or convincing in that clutter."

Then was the time and that the place to tell the District Attorney of my recent discovery, but something held me back. Sarah G. McCloud would be caught in the web she was weaving about James Quinn without any outside help. My thoughts raced ahead trying to picture what form the final crash would take when the buzzer attached to the side of my desk rang out sharply. Picking up my book and pencils, I hurried along the hallway to the courtroom and took my customary seat.

A hush of expectancy seemed to pervade the entire room. My eyes roamed over the crowded benches, a number of them filled with men and

women from the surrounding hills who had left their work in the fields and made the trip to the county seat simply to see Sarah G. McCloud, their fetish, "get the best o' them smart city lawyer men."

The afternoon session was duly opened and the State's star witness was about to seat herself in the witness chair. The defendant's counsel, with considerable poise and ability, resumed his direct examination while my hand glided swiftly over the pages of my notebook and my subconscious mind gaped in amazement.

To question after question flung unmercifully at the aged woman, the young attorney received answer upon answer equally subtle and concise. So clearly and with so little hesitancy did she relate the incidents leading up to the killing of Martin Weber, that I had constantly to remind myself of the whispered conversation I had overheard to prevent her convincing me also that she had been the only eye-witness.

Presently, however, I noted an indecision in her replies and an unusual stumbling for words. This was most marked when the actual murder was reached. The young attorney was a stickler for details—details such as had never been put to Sarah G. McCloud before.

On previous occasions, she had simply taken her seat in the witness-box, told her story in her own inimitable manner and, in due time, collected her fee and left the courthouse carrying her laurels proudly.

With trip-hammerlike regularity the prisoner's counsel kept up the grilling:

"Did James Quinn have his coat on or off at that time?

"Coat? Huh! Jimmie ne'er had his elbows covered in his life. That there coat he has on now was borrowed——"

"Please confine your replies strictly to my question, Mrs. McCloud," interrupted the persistent attorney. "I ask you again—Did James Quinn have his coat on or off at that time?"

"But," the witness rasped impatiently, "how could he have it either way, when he had none. An' what manner o' difference do a coat make? Why, I seed One-eyed Dan Kane kill Lizzie, his woman, bare to the waist."

A burst of laughter from the spectators greeted this response, but the young lawyer never faltered. With a determined look on his lean face, he proceeded at once to the next query:

"In what position was Martin Weber when you say James Quinn struck him down? Was he stooping over or standing erect and how——"

"I object!" This time it was the voice of the District Attorney that rang out sharp and clear. He rose to his feet and had reached the words "immaterial and irrelevant" in his objection, when he was stopped by the aged witness herself.

"Ye're to object to nothin', Mr. District Attorney man! Nothing! Do ye hear me? This here's my fight and ye're to keep out o' it!"

THE next instant Sarah G. McCloud's gray head shook itself free of the faded "store" hat and the nervous fingers of her right hand unloosened the two top hooks of the tight fitting basque. With lips forming a straight line, she then rolled back the old-fashioned sleeves almost to the elbows, baring remarkably preserved arms above the wrinkled hands.

A feeling of great pity intermingled with greater admiration came over me. Whatever happened, the State's star witness was going down with her back to the wall and going down alone. Through nar-

rowed lids she appraised her tormentor from head to foot, but his eyes did not waver nor did he lower his head. Jerkily, she asked:

"What was that ye said afore?"

The question was repeated calmly and unhurriedly.

An ominous pause followed. The occupants of the benches, with one movement, leaned forward, their expressions plainly indicating that what seemed about to happen, couldn't happen. The District Attorney was pulling cruelly at his short mustache to hide his chagrin and the judge was fumbling with his inkstand and leaning far over his desk in a listening attitude. A look of uncertainty and doubt began to appear on the faces of several of the jurymen. And through it all the prisoner sat with his head in his hands, elbows on knees and eyes to the floor.

A few unintelligible, stumbling words issued from the white lips of the witness. In a conciliatory tone that must have cut the aged woman like a whip, the defendant's attorney said:

"Perhaps I did not succeed in making myself clear. I shall put the question to you in this manner: Was Martin Weber standing up or sitting down when James Quinn struck him?"

"What be the need o' all this hurry?" came the slow response. "Do ye not know this court lasts till four?" Then quickly, as if the thought had just occurred to her harassed mind—"And how can I tell ye that, when it was to answer a knockin' at the kitchen door that Marty left me standin' by the table in the fore room o' the shack."

At this statement the followers of Sarah G. McCloud heaved a sigh of great relief and sat back in their seats. Their idol had been vindicated. The aged witness, feeling a trifle surer of her ground, hastened to elucidate:

"And the next thing I heerd was a moanin' sort o' cry and a fallin' o' something to the floor. In my scare —no, that's not the word—in my caution, I flung mysel' under the sofy—the old sofy wi' the broken springs that stuck into my back—and lay still while Jimmie dragged poor Marty in and got ready the tatty-sack——"

"Just a minute! Just a minute, please!" the young attorney tried to break in, but "tatty-sack" seemed to have been the word the mountain woman had been seeking for so long; the word that brought her back to her original version of the murder and put the customary sureness in her shrill voice.

"Then Jimmie, after a lot o' swearin' and sweatin', got Marty into the sack. All but his feet. His feet wi' the new pair o' store shoes on that I heerd Jimmie envy but a week afore at the forked road grocery-postoffice. He stood there a bit scratchin' his head, thinkin' maybe what a shame it be to bury such a fine pair o' boots."

The judge tried to stop the flow of words that almost stumbled over themselves to leave her lips and I, unable to keep pace, turned to the District Attorney pleadingly:

"I'm sorry, but I'm not getting half of it—not half."

THE next minute I gave it up altogether and let the pencil slip from my fingers. My eyes lifted to the judge's desk and then lowered to the prisoner himself. To my surprise, he had lifted his head and gazed at his accuser for the first time during the trial. His huge hands were tightly gripping the seat of his chair and a look of utter unbelief came over his rather stupid countenance, as he drank in every word.

"Finally he got up enough spunk to take the shoes offen Marty's cold feet. Then by the fire he sat, chawing his terbaccy and holdin' 'em out afore him, every so often takin' a good look at the thick soles and new fangled rubber heels and——"

At this point, Sarah G. McCloud turned sharply and intently searched the face of the prisoner. What she saw there, I do not know, but there was no mistaking the note of triumph in her voice or the look of the conqueror in her shrewd eyes as she suddenly leaped from the witness-chair and, pointing a bony finger at the prisoner's feet, yelled:

"And he's got 'em on now. See! He's got Marty's new shoes on!"

"You lie!"

Like a bomb the hoarse voice of the accused man ripped the tensity of the unusual situation. Rising also to his feet, he repeated the words venomously:

"You lie! *They wouldn't fit!*"

When he realized what he had said and how cleverly he had been tricked, James Quinn, in his fury, tried to reach the aged woman, murder in his eyes for the second time. The entire audience rose as one man and surged forward while the District Attorney rushed between Sarah G. McCloud and the self-accused murderer and held him until an officer reached his side.

I saw that Mary had broken through the crowd and was standing below my desk, mouth agape, hair disheveled, staring up at the woman who had given her birth, with an expression I shall never forget.

The prisoner's attorney had been brushed aside in the excitement and was now leaning against one of the empty benches, the very picture of incredulity. With large pieces of blotting paper, the learned judge was trying to mop up the ink which had been overturned on his desk and which was dripping over the side and making a large stain on the floor near his chair.

And in the midst of this confusion, Sarah G. McCloud calmly picked up her faded plush hat from the floor and resumed her seat in the witness-box. With widened eyes, I watched her fumble with the hooks of her basque and bring forth the much soiled oilcloth "book" which, for the second time that day, she smoothed upon her knee. From the fly-leaf she then extracted the threaded darning-needle and her wrinkled but steady hand searched in the little draw-string bag and found a black shoe-button.

With an indescribable sardonic twitch at the corners of her snuff-smeared lips, the State's star witness plied the needle back and forth until she had securely fastened the button on the top of the white page that was to represent that year of her life in court.

He Stopped at Murder

By ARTHUR EBENHACK

HE entered the office building acting so suspiciously that a woman noticed him and called a policeman's attention to him. His coat collar turned up, a soft hat pulled well down over his forehead, he glanced in all directions as he made for the express elevator.

Thirty years old, but a healthy adolescent plumpness about his face suggested he was not a day over twenty-eight; obviously a gentleman, in spite of his clothes; his entire appearance was at striking variance with his suspicious actions.

In the anteroom of Windsor, Marvin & Hilton on the twentieth floor of the building, the young man turned down the coat collar and took off the slouch hat. The girl who vanished into an inner office with his name came back promptly with the message that Mr. Windsor would see him in a moment.

She was not afraid, left alone with him in the anteroom. His actions were no longer those of a dangerous criminal. And when Mr. Windsor called out, "You can send that would-be crook in," she merely looked up and smiled as if the remark were a joke.

"What is it this time?" Windsor demanded quietly. As senior partner of the firm of Windsor, Marvin & Hilton, he enjoyed the largest criminal practice in the state.

"Attempted grand larceny and blackmail!" meekly answered the young man who stood before him. The lawyer took some papers from a file, then turned back squarely to the criminal, his searching eyes focused like headlights.

"Look here, Gordon Emery," he charged furiously, "last week you tried your hand at forgery and auto thieving; and now it's safe-cracking and blackmail. What have you to say for yourself!

"Nothing," Gordon replied dejectedly.

Windsor leered viciously at the young man.

"Do you know what any other criminal would get for doing what you've done? No? Well, I've figured it up. Forty years is a conservative estimate; and that's with me, the best criminal lawyer in the state, defending him. It would take six months' solid work just *trying* to pull him out as much as I could. But you. . . ." Windsor threw his hands up in disgust.

"It's no use your trying to help me any more."

"You're right!" the lawyer agreed vehemently. "After last night's exhibition, I'm through with you. Don't tell me another word about it."

"Estelle is going to marry me, anyway, so I guess it doesn't make so much difference about the money,"

Gordon stated, as if this would mollify the ill humor of the other.

"Marry you! Great Scott! She deserves all she gets if she does! Now I understand why your uncle disinherited you. All I have to say is, get out of my office, and be quick about it!" Gordon was on his way when Windsor stopped him at the door. "Say, didn't you ever want to steal green apples when you were a boy?"

"No," Gordon answered simply. "Have a little pity on me, Mr. Windsor. I did the best I could, especially last night. I suppose I could have killed the man who tried to prevent me from stealing those papers, but I honestly hoped there was some way of getting arrested without committing murder."

And he went away.

NO ONE ever entered upon a career of crime with firmer intentions and for better reasons than young Gordon Emery. But he found that it is just as hard for a really good man to go wrong as it is for a bad man to go right.

Nine years ago, when Gordon became of age, his rich uncle, Mortimer Harden, had him come down to the real estate office one morning with Tom Harden, another nephew. Tom was the same age as Gordon and had already demonstrated the fact that he intended being a polished good-for-nothing, especially if he inherited any of his uncle's fortune.

"My nephews," he told the two of them, "you are now men!"

Behind a flimsy old oak desk that had a moth-eaten, green felt top, he pivoted far back on his aged office chair. It was much too frail a thing for a man of Uncle Mort's size to sit on, even carefully. If he hadn't been a grouchy tightwad he'd have bought a strong new mahogany chair ten years ago, and a fine new glass-top desk to match it; or at least he might have had the broken seat of the chair mended instead of filling it up with old newspapers.

"My nephews," he repeated after he had let an impressive pause sink in—wing collars and old-fashioned sideburns lent Mortimer Harden a dignity that never failed to impress—"you are now men! And being men, it is time you shake hands with the business world. You know that I have amassed a considerable fortune. What you do not know at your age is the prodigious amount of work required to amass it, the value of it, and how such a fortune must be handled. You are my only two heirs! I have considered carefully who must inherit my fortune. As you know, I have never married.

"For a time I thought I might endow a museum that would perpetuate the Harden name. However, I now favor the plan recommended by my good friend, Simeon Windsor, whom I have made executor of my estate. I shall leave the money to you boys. You will, therefore, in accordance with this plan, start work in this office tomorrow, to prove to me, during my remaining years, your financial fitness to inherit my fortune."

If at this point the old swivel chair had collapsed so that they could have burst into guffaws of laughter, and Uncle Mort, incensed at their levity, had kicked them out of the office and told them that neither would ever inherit a damned cent of his money, the laugh would have been worth the lost inheritance. But the chair only squeaked as their portly and eccentric uncle tilted back a little farther.

Gordon Avery and Tom Harden started in the next day learning the real estate business from the ground up; filling ink-wells, sharpening pencils, emptying waste-paper baskets, and now and then helping to dis-

possess an individual who either couldn't or wouldn't pay rent.

For the first few years they ran neck and neck for the old man's affections, each getting in just a little worse than the other. Tom went out on wild parties almost every night, and consequently was not available for selling lots and leasing buildings until about eleven in the morning. It was not Tom's indiscretions of the night before, but his tardiness at the office, which incurred the wrath of Uncle Mort.

Gordon came in for his share of the old man's bad humor simply because he was not cut out to be a successful real estate man. He was entirely too honest. He would tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth to every prospective customer. Mortimer Harden had to upbraid him continually for his lack of business acumen; to warn him that, unless he learned how to take advantage of people in a deal, he would be a thirty-dollar-a-week clerk all his life.

UPON countless occasions during the nine years following the memorable morning when he had put the two nephews to work, he had threatened with disinheritance first one then the other. But he took no definite step toward carrying out any of these threats, until Tom ran out of cash one night on a wild party and signed his uncle's name to a check for fifty dollars. Harden not only disinherited Tom for this but frigidly allowed the law to take its course. Poor Tom was "sent" up for two years.

Gordon, under the terms of the new will, was now made the sole beneficiary; and it looked as if honesty was to be rewarded in still another way, for Estelle Sohmer's father gave his consent to his daughter's marrying Gordon. The death of an uncle and a marriage ceremony at this time would have "set" Gordon for life.

But before either of these two events could transpire Gordon let his foot slip. He was trying to sell the Gregory country place to Colonel Houston. The Colonel had almost decided to buy it; but he was wavering a bit. He asked Gordon for his own frank opinion of the estate.

"Is there anything that isn't in first class condition?" he suddenly inquired of the young man.

And as quickly as the question had been put, Gordon told him that the foundation on the north side of the house was sinking. The deal ended then and there. That little morsel of honesty almost cost Gordon a million cold dollars; for when his uncle learned why the Gregory sale had fallen through, he called in Simeon Windsor and had him prepare another will. Windsor tried to dissuade the old man.

"Look here, Mort," he said when he learned the circumstances, "don't make a fool of yourself by leaving the money to some society. You wouldn't want Gordon to tell a lie. Be reasonable."

"Then I'll leave my money to Tom!"

"Tom's in jail for two years. He isn't fit to inherit a penny of your money, anyway. You've got to go easy on this matter of heirs. You've got only one left."

"Do you think I'll leave a cent of it to that good-for-nothing nut who would ruin my real estate business with his honesty? Not on your life! Now, it's different with Tom. He was a good sport when he was sent to jail and he didn't cry for help. Tom's regular, that's what he is. Make the new will out this way: I'm leaving everything to Tom because he went to jail like a man."

"It wouldn't be legal."

"Look here, Simeon Windsor, you and I have been in some tight legal

places in the last twenty years, and I know you can write it up so as it *will* be legal. Now do it!"

There was no use raising further objections on moral or legal or any other grounds when old Harden gave orders in that old commanding way of his. So a last will and testament for one Mortimer Harden was drawn up leaving the entire fortune to "that nephew, who by reason of a certain punishment inflicted upon him by society, shall most need it to reestablish himself."

Nothing was to be gained by argument. Let the absurd will stand for a week or two, thought Windsor, who had read old Harden like a book these many years. A brief lapse of time and Mortimer would be in a state of mind to change it of his own accord. But man proposes and God disposes. Three days after he had signed the new will, the old man died in that rickety crazy chair of his. A stroke—while he was busy with important affairs—just as he would have liked to go.

"There's nothing to be done," Windsor told Gordon the day after the funeral, "except to meet the terms of the will. We've got a month to probate it. All you've to do in the meantime is to get sent up for some offense that permits the court to decide you need the fortune more than Tom. A mere technicality. Forgery, blackmail, larceny; anything that gets you sent up for more than two years will do the trick. I have it all arranged so that as soon as the will is probated and decided in your favor you'll get a sentence suspended."

Gordon listened in amazement. He couldn't, he wouldn't be a party to such a nefarious business. He tossed on his bed that night; he had dreams so hideous that they awakened him with a start. Then he thought of Estelle, and marriage, and the long dim future.

He was but human, he kept telling himself, to ease his burning conscience. The million was his by every right. A crazy old uncle punishing him for his business integrity! It was a cruel jest of fate. He would . . . yes, he would.

IT was such a cut-and-dried matter that the lawyer expected his client to have no difficulty whatever in carrying out the simple details. He was to forge a check for a thousand dollars on old man Sohmer, his prospective father-in-law. Sohmer, who was in on the plan, would then have him arrested. A friendly judge would sentence him. These proceedings would provide adequate evidence to bring about a decision on the will in Gordon's favor. After Gordon was in possession of the fortune, the judge would suspend sentence.

Why he had to go through this formula to get the fortune that belonged to him wasn't quite clear to Gordon. But then other legal matters would have been equally baffling had he stopped to think. A married couple desiring a divorce because they have become incompatible must satisfy the law's demand for infidelity before they can have the decree they want and mean to get on account of incompatibility. Or, a man desires to pay tax on only half his income; his mere wish on the matter gets him nowhere, but an elaborate distributing of his income into this column and that satisfies the law. Law is a riddle for lawyers to solve. Mr. Windsor, as Gordon's lawyer, was solving the riddle for him. Ethically, too. At least, so thought the young convert to sophistry.

Windsor's trained legal mind could not see a possible hitch in the plan. There *was* one, however. Gordon did forge a check for a thousand dollars, signing Sohmer's name. The check was cashed. But the law was indis-

posed when it came to laying hands on Gordon.

Gordon had stayed in the office all that morning, very nervous, and quite uncertain of himself. He couldn't make up his mind. He filled out a dozen checks for a thousand dollars, but he hadn't dared sign one of them. On a separate sheet of paper he traced Sohmer's signature. It was uncanny business. He didn't like it. This matter of inheriting a fortune had got him all upset.

With a little practice, he was able to make a credible imitation of Sohmer's signature when he wrote it on the blank sheet of paper, but when he tried to put it at the bottom of a check his nerve failed him utterly.

Suddenly Gordon went cold all over. Someone was coming up behind him; a man, he thought at first. Had it been dark he would have expected the startling presence to turn out to be the ghost of his Uncle Mort.

By degrees almost imperceptible he began to realize that only a girl was —could be—there. Estelle? No, this couldn't be she. But if it had been! What would she think of so dishonest a deed? He hadn't the courage to look around. Panic-stricken, he heard the light footsteps coming around to the front of his desk.

"Goodmorning!"

He must look up, for she was standing immediately in front of him now; the Salvation Army lass who brought the *War Cry* around each week. Relief came over him. He poked his hand in his pocket for a five-cent piece as she silently put a copy of the paper on the corner of the desk, turning meekly away as soon as he handed her the money. She dared not presume to interrupt a business executive longer than was absolutely necessary.

"Wait a moment, miss!" he called to her. "How's the work of the Army coming along?"

"Very well," she told him. "We have just finished the Home Service Fund Drive for this year. People aren't as much interested as they used to be. I guess they think our work isn't so important after the war."

"Now, that's too bad," he assured her. "If you're going to be short this year let me give you a check to help make up the deficit."

"Anything you care to give will be appreciated, no matter how small."

He made out the check abruptly and handed it to her. Watching her glance at the amount, he smiled faintly, for her eyes popped out like stops on a pipe organ.

"Oh, thank you so much!" she exclaimed breathlessly.

God, it was great to be rich! Never before had Gordon felt the flush of another's gratitude like this. The warm wave went over his entire body. It was after the lass had left that he realized soberly that he had actually committed a crime.

The afternoon paper carried this headline:

CLEAN-UP CAMPAIGN
OF "ARMY" BEGINS

Sohmer, Venerable Smith Street Merchant, Leads off with $1,000

It was news because Sohmer never gave anything to charity and the article went on to say, in part, that if nine other prominent citizens would emulate Mr. Sohmer's splendid example, the deficit would be wiped out for the year. Sohmer's phone was kept busy that afternoon and evening. Business men, friends, relatives, even his wife and daughter, congratulated him. He accepted the good wishes of everybody. But he also got in touch with the bank.

A little investigation revealed that this was the check that Gordon had signed. Windsor had led him to believe that Gordon would cash the check himself and return the thousand dollars immediately. Now it was a most baffling situation. This bringing the Salvation Army into the picture made it problematic as to how he would be repaid his thousand dollars. The more he thought of it the more he was convinced that he wouldn't be repaid. Windsor and Gordon had made a goat of him. He would have taken great delight in having his prospective son-in-law arrested for forgery now and to press the charge. But it was impossible. The publicity tied him hand and foot.

"Who but you would have thought of anything like that?" Windsor demanded of Gordon when he learned of the failure of the plan. "You have a positive genius for doing good even when I have you completely hemmed in by evil. Why, you're like the crook who'd be looking for something to steal even if he owned the earth!"

THAT same day the Sohmer-Emery engagement was called off. Sohmer was so emphatic about it that even Gordon's promise to pay back the thousand, as soon as he inherited his uncle's fortune, did not deter him in the matter. Estelle herself was a bit cool to Gordon; for when Gordon finally got her on the phone the utmost she would promise her "former fiancé" was a short drive with him into the country the next day.

"Gordon, it's so, what papa says. You'll be nothing but a clerk all your life and you'll never get a penny of your uncle's money," she told him sweetly but firmly as they sped along through verdant scenes. Her flaming auburn hair, dancing in the spring sunshine, and her over-blue eyes looking straight into his less poetic brown ones—this was enough to make a crook out of any man.

"Is that so!"

Estelle had never heard her lover speak so boldly, and she loved him in that moment more than ever. Her father should not sunder them, fortune or no fortune. After all, she was grown up; she knew her own mind. Yes, she said to herself as they sped on, she loved Gordon.

"Yes, what father says is true," she told him, "you are too honest. You will never be able to buy me any dresses; probably not enough food."

"Nice car I have here," he answered coldly. He was more furious than he ever imagined he could be.

"I was noticing it," Estelle teased. "Whose is it?"

"Mine!" he snapped gently.

"Where did you get it?"

"Stole it!"

Silence, for a long time. The car raced recklessly over country roads at high speed. Estelle dared not protest, so threatening was the cloud that overcast the driver's face.

"Now do you want to drive around town with me for a while? They ought to pick me up in half an hour. I'd sort of like to have you along when they arrest me."

"Take me home right away!" she pleaded tearfully.

Two hours of aimless driving alone over the city streets. He passed every officer on the force; half the automobile owners of the city had an opportunity to see him and to identify the car; all this failed to bring down the arm of the law! What was the matter with his lawyer? He had given him the number of the stolen car over the telephone, told him to find the owner and to have the owner see to it that he was arrested.

"Say, what's the matter with you?" he demanded in Windsor's office when the thrill of riding in a stolen car had turned into disgust.

"I'll tell you what's the matter!" Windsor snapped back at him. "That's Harry Brown's old car, stolen from him last month, and now he's collecting the insurance and going to buy a new one. If you don't run it into the river or get it out of the way somehow I'll lose Harry's friendship for life."

"Oh!" sobbed Gordon and he sank into a chair. "Do I have to do something crooked all over again?"

Gordon had become, by this time, reasonably hardened to the so-called moral consideration. The bravado with which he had found it possible to deal with the Salvation Army lass, with Mr. Sohmer and with Estelle, afforded him a measure of courage. It was the fear of failure that sapped his strength. So, when Gordon went in for safe-cracking and blackmail, he decided it best to hire a professional as a guarantee of success. This boob, who had done a stretch of ten years up the river, was willing to work for ten dollars a night; fifteen, if gun-play was required.

THE safe they cracked had nothing but business papers in it, but Gordon took a few of these just to cinch the matter. It was the office of the Enterprise Manufacturing Company and a Mr. Graham, who was president of the company and also the corrupt political boss of the second ward, happened in on the scene just in time to see Gordon and his "pal" make their getaway.

"Take a good look so you don't forget my face, old man!" Gordon called to him as he vanished out the side door fully a minute after the crook had beat it.

"Say, what's the idea?" demanded the crook three blocks away, when Gordon handed him the ten dollars agreed on. "Are yuh tryin' out fer bein' a human target, or did yuh tink he'd invite yuh out tuh lunch t'morrer? Or wus yuh waitin' fer de newspaper fertogerfers?"

Gordon did not answer him.

"Yuh got whatcher wanted, didn't yuh? 'Twasn't a bad job, but a little too close a call. Dose damned burglar alarms! Say, we'd better beat it. I cut der phone wires, but he's likely got der cops on our trail by dis time anyway."

"Sure, I got what I wanted," Gordon told him cheerfully. "Everything is all right. You don't know how much I appreciate your help tonight. And I want you to know that in case I get arrested I won't implicate you."

"How'd yuh like ter help me burn down a warehouse t'morrer night? There'd be five hundred apiece in it fer us. Der place ain't no good an' de guy wat owns it got plenty of insurance on it. Der ain't one chanct in a thousand we'd get pinched fer it. I could do it meself, but it's sorta lonesome."

Gordon peered aghast into the face of the crook, which somehow or other had struck him up to this time as being a reasonably honest countenance.

"Do you mean to say," he demanded incredibly, "that you'd do a really dishonest job like that?"

The crook took an equally searching look at Gordon, then his twisted face gnarled itself into an ugly grimace. "What's de big idea? Say, I tink I'm gittin' de drift on yuh. Yuh a-handin' me a line of bull 'bout not givin' a damn if yuh git arrested or not. Yuh ain't no crook! Stick 'em up!"

"Help! Thief!" yelled Gordon, for the crook was reaching for his gun.

" 'Nother squeak from yuh and it'll be lilies growin' over yer body." With which remark he lifted Gordon's watch and a few bills he had in his pocket. A policeman, hearing Gordon's outcry, rushed up and nabbed the crook. Gordon marveled at the

efficiency of the local police system. So enraged was he at the ingratitude of his "pal" that he forgot momentarily his own aspirations.

"You can appear against him in the morning," the officer told Gordon as he took his prisoner off to jail.

Wistfully, Gordon watched them disappear around the corner. Several days passed, but no warrant came for Gordon's arrest. He found it necessary to call on Graham. Yes, Graham remembered him, knew his name.

"Your purpose is blackmail, I suppose, Mr. Emery." Graham suggested at once. "I'll give you ten thousand dollars to return those papers, but not a damned cent more."

Gordon, who had never been a good business man, forgot entirely to make his arrest a condition in the bargain. So that Mr. Graham, once having the papers safely back in his possession, was unwilling to risk the investigation which might result if he had Gordon arrested.

"Here's your money back. Now have me arrested! Please!

"Sure!" agreed Graham eagerly, taking the roll of bills.

But he never did.

ON the morning he left Windsor's office after making his final confession of failure, Gordon went straight to the showrooms of the Rebuilt Car Company and ordered a car of a certain cheap manufacture. A small initial payment was made and immediate possession of the car secured. The salesman said he could pay the balance in the usual monthly installments extending over a year.

The salesman had tried to sell him a more expensive make of car with "the tin you love to touch." Gordon appraised it longingly. He could have afforded it if he had inherited his uncle's fortune. He was glad he had not brought Estelle along. It would have embarrassed her—both of them for that matter—not to be able to buy as good a car as everybody else who was anybody had.

But this car which he had bought, which was well within his means considering that he could pay for it in monthly installments, was all right, he told himself.

As he drove away he forced himself to become increasingly proud of the fact that he was not aspiring to live beyond his means. It was the humble lot in life that was meant for him. What an unbelievable relief at having given up this matter of inheriting a fortune!

"You're quite sure you're not going to be unhappy because I am poor?" he asked Estelle, whom he had picked up around the corner from her home. Papa Sohmer forbade his calling.

"Oh, no, Gordon dear!" she told him. "You mustn't tease me about it any more. I can't even bear the thought of your stealing anything to get rich. Why, I've had the most terrible dreams since you took me for the ride in that stolen car. You and I were riding in stolen airships, and then we fell out. I grabbed, grabbed, grabbed! After a long time I caught hold of iron bars. They were prison bars, Gordon, and you were behind them. Gordon, promise me, dear, you will never, never steal anything else."

"Yes, dear, I promise you."

"Oh, Lord, you didn't steal this car, did you?"

"No, dear, I was telling the truth when I said I bought it on the installment plan."

"Will you always tell me the truth?"

"Yes, dear."

"And you'll never do anything that'll make you get arrested?"

"No, dear."

"Have I helped you a wee bit to go straight?"

"Yes, sweetheart."

"I couldn't bear having you get ar-

rested and being separated from me a single moment."

Thus they exchanged pretty nothings on their way to the clergyman who lived in the neighboring town and who would make them man and wife, blest with eternal happiness.

Some time during the very day the wheels of justice would turn over permanently to "that nephew who by reason of a certain punishment, inflicted upon him by society, shall most need it to reestablish himself" the whole of the Mortimer Harden estate. Gordon's worthless cousin, Tom, serving a two years' term in the state prison for forgery, would inherit over a million dollars when Windsor probated the will.

STRANGE, but Gordon saw nothing unjust about the law or the world in general. All he could see was Estelle, who would soon be his. It had not been as difficult that morning to tell Windsor of his intention to give up any more attempts to inherit the money as he had imagined it would be. He could have used the million, of course. There would have been fun spending it on Estelle. But why think of it any more?

Nothing could have affected one way or the other the happiness which the two felt as the little car pounced on a stretch of paved road that was a speedway for ten miles. The desired clergyman lived in the town at the end of this ribbon of asphalt.

"Look!" said Gordon, as he took from behind the seat a bottle of old wine that his mother had given him.

They had covered about half the distance by this time. The only other car on the straightaway was a motorcycle half a mile back, which had appeared mysteriously from nowhere. They were going about the same speed. Then Gordon outdistanced the motorcycle perceptibly. His natural anxiety to get married, quickened by the fact that they were eloping, was responsible for his "stepping on it." Then the man on the motorcycle let her out.

"There's someone following us. Let's stop and see what he wants," Estelle cried. "Maybe we've dropped something."

Gordon took a quick look, then slowed down with that amazing quickness which burns out brake linings and convinces officers of the law that the driver is a humble menial in the presence of any traffic cop. The visor of his cap shaded the man's eyes. But Gordon took a foolish chance on eyes that he couldn't gauge squarely. He started waving a five-dollar bill as he and the officer of the law came to a standstill.

The officer took plenty of time to park his motorcycle on the other side of the road; then, with maddening deliberation, he crossed dramatically to a position where he could read the denomination of the currency.

"Say, the field days was two months ago!" he bawled out.

"Couldn't I get a couple of tickets for next year?" Gordon queried meekly.

"Now, honestly, young feller, what you tryin' to get away wit?"

Gordon was sufficiently conversant in traffic drama to know that no answer was required to this question. He must act like a little boy who dared not answer the questions his father was asking, unless he wanted papa to get all the angrier.

"Do you think buyin' a coupla tickets to the Police Games entitles you to do the ten-mile dash here every day for a year?"

Another pause, but not a word from the meek Gordon.

"An' do you think it would entitle you to kill ten dollars' worth of Mrs. Mulligan's chickens an' the chickens of all the other families around here, folks who's tryin' to make a few ex-

tra dollars in the poultry business?"

Gordon respectfully suggested that, if he had killed any of Mrs. Mulligan's hens, the officer reimburse her with the five dollars. But he still ignored the bill.

"An' what right have you to ask me to risk my own life racin' like mad to ketch up with you?"

The realization that the officer had no intention of ever accepting the five dollar bill made Gordon so inarticulate that his explanation of the errand to the clergyman was not convincing at all. It was quite obvious that romance did not appeal to this hard-boiled individual. So Gordon got out of the car.

He meant only to punch him gently in the jaw so that Estelle and he could continue on their way. What Gordon did was to hit him on the head with the bottle of wine that he forgot to put down during the argument. Anyway, it was honest wine that had been made by his mother in the days before prohibition.

There the officer lay in the roadway—cold.

It had been an amazingly simple solution of the perplexing difficulty, and soon he and Estelle were speeding away.

"You were more than generous in offering him five dollars," Estelle told Gordon. "He got just what he deserved for being so stubborn. It's about time we have gentlemen to direct traffic." Whereupon Gordon stepped on it again.

But apparently Gordon hadn't tapped the officer on the head quite hard enough, for when he and Estelle were leaving the clergyman's study, now linked together by indissoluble ties, this same watchdog of the traffic force was on hand to menace them further. There was no question of his righteous anger now.

Gordon was brought up on four charges: speeding, attempted bribery, assaulting an officer of the law and illegal transportation of intoxicating liquor. The latter charge was dismissed because the evidence had been destroyed. The judge fined Gordon five hundred dollars and gave him a year in jail, suspending the jail sentence as his was a first offense. But, when the wisdom of the court was questioned by the defendant, an additional six months was added for contempt of court, with none of the original jail sentence suspended. Gordon's behavior at this moment was decidedly erratic, for he kept on arguing with the judge, leaning so far over the magistrate's desk that his elbow upset an inkwell and the contents of this inkwell splattered over the judge's face and shirt front. Six months more for disorderly conduct.

Bad men sometimes go straight and good men sometimes go wrong—maybe. Gordon's flair for crime at this instant was magical. He coveted the expensive car he had been unable to buy! And why couldn't he be rich enough to sign a check for a thousand any time he wanted to? Oh, it was unbearable to think he didn't have all the money he wanted, to lavish countless gifts on his love! Avaricious dreams of a million dollars slipping out of his hands maddened him. He might just as well get six months more which would make his sentence longer than Tom's, and thereby inherit that million.

In the enthusiasm attendant on the complete demolishment of the courtroom, which consisted of the splintering of chairs and tables and the smashing of windows, a total of five years had been announced before representatives of the law were able to conquer this dangerous man.

THREE days later the aches and pains were subsiding a bit so that he was able to reflect. He couldn't move the right leg yet and the pains in his

back were still potent. One eye was bandaged. With the other he was barely able to transmit the message to his brain that he was no longer locked up, but at home. Estelle must have been nursing him.

"Anyway, I'm glad I did it," he announced.

"You mustn't mention it again," she wept.

"Why not? Didn't it bring in a cold million?" he demanded.

"I've told you a hundred times that you got your uncle's money, as the court declared that the will which gave the money to Tom was illegal, because it contained an inducement for one or more of Mortimer Harden's nephews to commit a crime."

"Oh, I see," Gordon agreed feebly as he sank back on his pillow. "I'm glad I got in jail, though," he added a little later. "It proves I'm a regular fellow." Estelle started to cry again. It seemed that she was crying all the time. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"I had to tell the judge! I had to tell the judge!" she was sobbing incoherently.

"And *what* did you have to tell the judge, dear?"

"I didn't want to tell him anything. I really didn't. But Mr. Windsor said it was the only way, and that it was all fixed up, and that if I said it they would let me take you home. I had to emphasize how peculiarly you were acting all that day. My statements and your behavior in the courtroom proved the point conclusively, Mr. Windsor told me afterward."

"So that's why they let me out of jail!"

"Gordon, dear—you won't be upset—will you? You weren't in jail!" Estelle confessed laboriously.

"No?"

"No! The insane asylum!"

"Oh, my God!

"And I had to help prove that you were insane."

She was obviously very much upset. Gordon could see she needed comforting. "Now that's all right," he whispered to her softly, pocketing his pride, "I wouldn't think about it a second longer. We're married and happy and have a million dollars."

"But, Gordon, you don't understand. You don't know why they let you out," she insisted on telling him. "The judge was a bachelor and he excused you because he said that—he said that you and all men were temporarily insane on their wedding day."

"He said that!" Gordon was out of his sick bed in a flash. He grabbed his hat and coat. "I'll murder the scoundrel for saying that!"

"Please don't!" Estelle pleaded earnestly as she stopped him." Murder's a serious offense. You might get arrested!"

You can't ignore

"The Under Dog"

By AGATHA CHRISTIE

in our April 1 issue

The Coming of Spring

By WALTER W. LIGGETT

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE

I

THERE was something uncanny, almost terrifying, in the unaccustomed silence of the house. Usually at this hour she was humming snatches of songs as she clattered away at the breakfast dishes. Now the only sound was the dripping of the kitchen faucet that never would quite close. She had asked him to have it fixed yesterday morning; said that it made her nervous when she was alone all day in the house. A faint smile twitched his lips. It wouldn't bother her today, her last day in the house. He had thought of that when she complained.

He drew out his watch. Too early yet to call the taxi. How interminable each minute seemed this morning! He resumed his restless pacing up and down the narrow hallway, occasionally snapping his fingers with impatience. Again he glanced at his watch and for a moment stood tense, immobile. She had been dead exactly two hours. He did not feel the relief, the sense of freedom he had anticipated. But that would come later when all danger of detection was passed. He shrugged angrily. There was no danger. He had seen to that. But he could not disguise from himself that he was more nervous than he expected to be.

He understood now why murderers—he grimaced slightly at the designation — sometimes betrayed themselves by overlooking vital details in their agitation. He had guarded against that. He had acted, after hours of patient analysis and the consideration of every possible contingency. His only danger lay in not following his program. Again he resolved not to depart in any particular from his prearranged plans.

He drew out his watch once more, then stepped to the telephone. His throat felt curiously dry. He paused with one hand on the receiver. The operator must not notice anything unusual in his voice. He composed himself for a moment and then spoke in the empty room:

"Central, give me Main 368." His voice sounded flat and he uttered the words several times before attaining his usual crisp, casual tones. Then he took down the receiver and laconically repeated the phrase to the operator.

"Elite garage?" he queried when the connection was made. "Mr. Naysmith speaking. Will you send out a taxi right away? I want to make the 10.20 train."

Hanging up the receiver with an unconscious sigh of relief, he stood intent, frowning slightly, fingers

nervously drumming on the old-fashioned telephone box. Some vague suggestion was stirring his brain, telegraphing an unmistakable warning. His frown deepened and his eyes narrowed as he tried to define this disquieting premonition.

The telephone! That was it. He gasped in dismay as it flashed into his mind. If anyone called up after he left, and of course failed to get a reply, his whole alibi was threatened. He had entirely overlooked this possibility. His first moment of sheer astonishment was succeeded by something perilously near panic.

He raised the receiver with a sudden impulse to tear it from the phone, then swiftly replaced it and began unscrewing the wires that connected with the bell. If the bell didn't ring, he reflected, the operator, or whoever might call, would infer the telephone was out of order. But his hands were trembling and his forehead wet. He had tried to include every eventuality; believed that he had, and yet this one, almost forgotten detail might have undone his months of planning. The possibility shook his self-possession.

A smudge of dust was on his fingers. Doubtless he had left fingerprints on the telephone bell. However, it did not matter. That evidence would soon be destroyed. He walked back to the kitchen sink to wash his hands. It was the fourth time he had washed them that morning. The continuous drip of the hot water faucet irritated him unreasonably. He tried to jerk it shut, but the drops fell with monotonous regularity as he dried his hands. No wonder she complained about it. He hadn't realized before that these little things could so affect one's nerves.

AS he was about to leave the kitchen, he paused irresolutely at the door opening into the basement. Should he take one last look to satisfy himself that he had neglected nothing? He felt an instinctive aversion toward entering the basement again; but the incident at the telephone had shattered his confidence. It would be well to be assured.

Impatiently he jerked open the door, and, going down a few steps, stooped until he had a view of the basement. For a few moments he gazed at a spot near the rough boards that partitioned off the coal-bin where three candles threw a narrow, flickering circle of light in the gloom. Everything was as he had left it, except that the candles were perceptibly shorter than when he had lighted them an hour before.

He reentered the kitchen; absent-mindedly washed his hands; made sure that the back door was locked and bolted; returned to the front hall, and glanced at his watch again. The taxi would be due in three or four minutes. He opened the front door a few inches, reassured himself that the spring lock was set, closed it, and then paused before a full-length mirror set in the wall.

Almost mechanically his hand patted his tie into place and twirled the ends of his short, crisp mustache. Then he slowly, carefully scrutinized his mirrored image in the manner of an actor studying himself in a new part. Muscular but spare, a little over average height, his gray tweed business suit obviously tailor made; clean shaven — with close-cropped auburn hair, slightly gray at the temples, with keen, gray eyes, he looked the typical professional man.

He observed with satisfaction that his eyes were clear and untroubled; that the color in his cheeks was good; and as his hand raised again to pat his tie, he noticed it no longer trembled. He smiled in the mirror and to his critical eye the smile seemed easy and unaffected.

From head to foot he scanned himself, switching on the hall light that he might see the better. He noticed a shred of excelsior clinging to his trouser leg. He stooped to pluck it away and also detected a spot of wax on the toe of his shoe. He scraped it off and rubbed the spot with a moistened finger. He gave himself a final inspection before the mirror and switched off the hall light after another approving smile.

There was a crunch of frozen gravel outside as an automobile whirled into the driveway and came to a stop under his portico, with the protesting whine of suddenly applied brakes. Naysmith unhurriedly stepped to the hall-tree, put on his overcoat and hat, picked up his brief case, and returned to the door. His hand was on the knob but he did not open it. Instead he stood waiting until he heard the impatient honking of the auto horn outside. Then Naysmith opened the door a scant foot, and standing half in the opening, raised his voice as if he were addressing some one in the kitchen.

"Goodby, dear," he called. "Take things easy while I'm away. You needn't bother about the furnace. I've fixed it. Yes, the fire will keep till I get back. I put plenty of coal on." He paused a moment and then called again; "All right, goodby."

Naysmith stepped out on the porch, one hand still holding the doorknob. The waiting taxi was not ten feet away, its engine still running.

"Good morning, George," Naysmith greeted the driver as he started to shut the door, but when it was almost closed, as if in response to some sudden call from the house, he swung it out again and half thrust his head into the opening.

"No, dear, I won't forget that thread," he laughed. "If I do I'll go back for it." He paused a moment. "Yes, I'll be back on the 5.10. Goodby." He closed the door and turned to the waiting chauffeur.

"Don't get married, George," he grinned, "unless you're a good shopper. I've got to match this today" —he pulled a lean spool of orange-colored silk thread from his overcoat pocket—"or I needn't come back for supper, my wife just told me."

"Yes, I heard yer," the chauffeur assented. "That's why I don't get married."

"Nice, crisp morning," Naysmith continued, pulling on his chamois gloves. His eyes swept the frost-rimed road and turned casually to the river, a scant stone's throw from the porch. Its banks were still thickly fringed with ice, although there was a dark streak of open water in the center of the stream.

"Feels like a thaw to me," the taxi driver answered.

"I hardly think so," Naysmith indifferently rejoined, casting a cursory glance at the overcast sky as he climbed into the cab.

NAYSMITH could hardly restrain a chuckle as the driver threw in the clutch and the car shot out of the driveway. That idea of pretending to talk with his wife was sheer genius. How naturally he had carried it off! George was completely fooled. His words and manner proved that. Now his alibi was perfect.

He idly scanned the countryside. The coverlet of snow on the hills was wearing thin and here and there patches of earth showed through like ugly splashes of ochre. The bare, pole-like poplars that lined the lane gave an indefinable touch of somberness to the scene. How he hated it and always had!

He had chosen the locality, that particular house, after long search because it suited his purpose. Now that his purpose was accomplished

he would leave as soon as possible. But as the car turned into the main road he stole a backward glance.

The serene aspect of the white bungalow nestling amid the clump of firs at the river's edge with the spiral of smoke ascending from the chimney seemed to bear mute evidence of cheery warmth and human habitation. There was something infinitely reassuring in that last hasty look before the hill obscured his view. It was as if the one inanimate accomplice which for months had sheltered his plans and shielded their ghastly consummation, gave its definite promise to share his secret silently to the end.

As the taxicab approached the railway station Naysmith fumbled in his pockets until he had counted in his hand the exact fare plus his usual tip of a dime. He felt a strange disposition to fee George more liberally than usual this morning, but he was determined not to depart in any respect from his daily routine.

II

THE train was not in sight, and after buying a morning paper, Naysmith, following his habit, began briskly walking up and down the platform. He had formed no real friendships and few intimacies during his six-months residence in Riverside.

A distant, polite reserve always marked his manner; but now he became conscious of an alarming tendency to temper with an unwonted amiability the customary curtness of his greetings to his fellow commuters. In the very effort to resist this impulse toward cordiality, he wondered if he was not making his tones more than ordinarily gruff. He fancied he could discern an expression of surprise in the eyes of two or three men he accosted.

He wondered, too, if he was insensibly accelerating his usual pace as he strode along the platform; whether his step might not seem hurried and the nervousness of his manner be remarked upon later. For a moment he considered halting his brief constitutional, but he reflected this, too, might create comment. He continued to walk, endeavoring to approximate his normal stride, but his legs felt rigid; his heels seemed to hit the pavement awkwardly and hard.

He felt a sudden constraint in his limbs, his voice, his very manner. He recalled the stage-fright that had gripped him once, years before, when he had made his first appearance in amateur theatricals. Now, once more, he was seized by this same p a r a l y z i n g self-consciousness.

As he passed neighbors and acquaintances, he found it an increasingly difficult ordeal to modulate naturally his words of casual greeting. His throat was dry and constricted and once his voice broke sharply as he replied to a salutation. "Have a little cold this morning," he gruffly explained, but despite the chill air he felt beads of moisture gathering on his forehead and under his breath he cursed this disquieting ineptitude. It was with an unconscious sigh of relief that he saw the smoke of the engine, like a dark plume, emerge above the trees at the river bend.

He climbed aboard one of the forward coaches, finding a vacant seat near the rear door. He had chosen this train because it was seldom crowded, and settling back in the corner, spread his morning paper to conceal his discomposure. He was still angry and astonished at his sudden loss of *sangfroid* at the station. He cursed himself again for a nerv-

ous fool; but as he came to reflect more calmly, he gradually recovered his equanimity.

After all, he doubted if anyone had noticed anything strange in his manner. Probably it was chiefly a state of mind, exaggerated self-consciousness. He would do better when he came back that afternoon, and he was convinced he could do better, for then he would have an opportunity to employ his talents as an actor.

His brief experience as an amateur player had taught him that action, any kind of action, is far easier than to stand around idly and feign unconcern. Thus reassured, he began to revolve his program for the day, still hidden behind his outspread newspaper.

The train was due in the city at 11:30. He would call at Magnuson's real estate office first and tell him he could not buy that photographic studio. He couldn't, either; not now; but probably the deal would wait until he had collected the insurance money. His lips lifted in a faint grin.

It would take him about half an hour to finish with Magnuson and then he would eat lunch. No, he wouldn't bother about lunch. He wasn't hungry, and wasn't likely to be. Instead he would go to a department store and buy two spools of thread to match the orange silk in his pocket. He smiled again. That idea had been an inspiration. Think of spending half an hour making a trifling purchase for a woman who had been dead, murdered, for several hours!

It was only a detail, but there was a certain sheer artistry in its conception. That, and the pretended conversation with his wife which George had observed. It was this meticulous attention to details, to every detail, that gave him this perfect sense of security.

AFTER he had purchased the thread he would go to the library and read until it was time to catch the four o'clock train. He would arrive at Riverside at 5:10. There was a tightness about his diaphram at the thought. That would bring his first and his last real test. But after all, it was only a question of acting. And now he felt entirely adequate for the part he would be called upon to play.

He knew almost to the minute when his house would catch on fire. How well he recalled that afternoon in the cellar when he had measured off inch intervals on half a dozen wax candles and sat by them, hour after hour, watch in hand, to see just how rapidly they burned. The flame consumed an inch of wax in approximately forty-five minutes. The three candles now burning in his cellar had been exactly eight inches long. They were embedded in two inches of flashlight powder. Loose oil-soaked excelsior was piled about. He had touched a match to the wicks of the candles at nine o'clock. At one-thirty, or within two or three minutes of that hour, the flickering flames would have eaten their way into the pile of loose powder. The basement would be a mass of flames a few seconds later.

He had first thought of starting the fire with an alarm clock and an electric attachment. He had even constructed the apparatus, and it worked perfectly. But it never seemed safe. The fire might destroy the evidence, but, on the other hand, some one kicking around the ruins might find the clock with the wires still connected. It would create suspicion, probably result in an investigation. He dared not run the risk. Then he had thought of candles. He

remembered when the idea first occurred to him.

His wife always used candles on the supper table; thought them artistic. Idly smoking his cigar one night, watching the guttering candles slowly burn down, the plan flashed into his mind. His experiments convinced him there was little variation in their burning time. They left no evidence. That had finally resolved his last doubts. The one element of danger he feared was obviated. He had thrown away the alarm clock and proceeded with his plans.

He had fixed the hour for starting the blaze after careful consideration. It must be long enough after he had left the house to preclude any suspicion attaching to him, but the fire must be well under way before the butcher and grocer made their afternoon deliveries around three o'clock. He also remembered that his two nearest neighbors, both merchants in the village, returned to their homes from lunch.

The fire wouldn't start until they had gone back to their stores. That would leave no one in the neighborhood but women when the fire was discovered. Even if men were in the vicinity, he had no fear of their breaking in a door or window and attempting a rescue. The flimsy bungalow would be wrapped in flames almost instantly. He had seen to that. Besides, his wife's body was in the basement, where the blaze would be the hottest. No one could possibly penetrate there.

The boxes, paper and excelsior left after their furniture was unpacked six months before had been stored in a corner of the basement. Only a week ago when the basement underwent its annual cleaning by the village man-of-all-work, he had ordered this inflammable débris shifted beside the coal-bin, directly under his wife's bedroom, with the excuse that he intended to set up his flashlight apparatus in the corner it had occupied.

"That's pretty close to the furnace," the man had objected. "It's likely to catch fire."

"No, it will be all right," he had replied, outwardly indifferent, but inwardly elated that the workman had observed the possible danger. "Spring is nearly here. The furnace won't have a fire in it much longer."

The man would be sure to remember this conversation, after the fire, and tell it everywhere with village garrulity. It supplied an explanation for the fire. Of course he might be criticized for carelessness—once more he complacently smiled—but he could stand that. The arrangement of that incident, too, showed a touch of genius. He had neglected nothing in constructing a perfect alibi.

He wondered who would first notice the fire. Probably the wife of his nearest neighbor. Doubtless she would telephone to the fire department. He smiled at the thought of the excitement in the sleepy village; the brazen clangor of the old-fashioned bell in the tower over the fire house; Simms, the merchant, fat Jake Starobin, the butcher, and the others rushing from their stores and offices to take their places on the ropes as the antiquated hand engine pulled through the slippery streets, with half the population streaming in its wake.

A fire always supplied the town with a topic of conversation for a week. Doubtless this fire would keep them talking for a year. Once more his lips writhed with an almost imperceptible smile.

The bungalow would be blazing before the department could possibly traverse the mile from the fire hall. And the nearest fire hydrant

was two long blocks away. Probably it was still frozen. He knew it had been during the severe weather. But even without this handicap the amateur firemen would take an interminable time to string the hose. There would not be the slightest chance of saving the bungalow, with that pile of tinder in the basement. The whole interior would be aflame long before the fire-engine arrived.

He could picture the whole scene (first a few startled neighbors—probably all of them women—grouped about the burning house, well in the lea of the flames, excitedly asking if anyone had seen his wife. Then the throng would come streaming out from the village after the fire-engine—men, women, and children—some in automobiles, some driving delivery wagons, most of them running. They would rush about the house, breathless, excited, confused, impeding the firemen's frantic efforts). There would be questions by the late comers.

"Anyone in the house?" someone would demand, probably the plethoric fire chief. A dozen voices would inform him that Mr. Naysmith had gone to town that morning.

"Where's the wife?" He could vizualize the neighboring women as they hysterically repeated she had not been seen outside the house that day; that she was in poor health and subject to fainting spells.

A dozen men would clamor for axes. There would be a half-hearted attempt to pass the barrier of flame. Finally spectators would stand back in fascinated horror, forming an ever-widening circle as the heat increased.

George Devers, the taxi driver, would be there. He was a member of the fire department. George would tell how he had driven him to the station that morning. The people would crowd around. Inflated by a sense of importance, George would tell and retell every word he had heard on the porch that morning. Naysmith chuckled. George would tell more than he *heard*. Doubtless his vivid imagination already had supplied the obvious answers to the imaginary colloquy. George was that kind of a moron. Naysmith already had discovered the taxi driver remembered with phonographic fidelity.

George would tell about the spool of silk and there would be tears at that dramatic touch. He—Naysmith—wouldn't forget the silk when he returned. He would pretend to be dazed, stupefied by grief and, pulling out the spools, would relate how he had spent half an hour matching that peculiar orange shade. That was a detail every woman there would remember. They would talk about it at the weekly meeting of the Sewing Circle. It would convince every one of them of his innocence should any question ever arise. He chuckled again. Yes, he was proud of that idea of matching the thread.

FINALLY the roof would fall in. He cynically wondered whether the fire department would get water on the blaze before it did, and when the fire had burned itself out, they would search the smoking débris in the basement.

The fact that her body was in the basement would create no comment. It would naturally fall through when the floor was burned and, in any event, it was known she was subject to fainting spells. Why might not she have been overcome while in the basement? No, there wasn't a weak spot in his plan, and when they did find her charred body those telltale black marks on her throat would be forever obliterated.

He estimated it would take about

two hours for the fire to reduce the house to ruins. The firemen would hardly be able to search the cellar and find the body before four o'clock.

Would they notify him at the railway station? George would say that he had told his wife he expected to return on the 5:10 train. He wondered who would be delegated to break the news. Probably the pastor of her church. Then would come his hardest task, simulating surprise and grief. Well, he could do it. He wouldn't have to roll his eyes and make dramatic gestures. That was only done in the movies. No, he would take it quietly; appear dazed; mechanically reiterate "My God!" They would think him stunned by sorrow.

They would ride out to his home in the taxicab. He would be led through the gaping crowd of villagers around the smoking ruins; then the sight of his wife's charred corpse. More acting; a few tears if he could summon them—and next? Well, there would be more unpleasant details; possibly an inquest, although he doubted it, but it was worth the cost. Yes, it was worth $25,000. That was the amount he had insured her for a little less than a year ago.

His eyes narrowed. That life insurance was the weakest link of the chain of circumstances he had so painstakingly forged. Insurance companies were skeptical, particularly when wives died so soon after being insured. That was why he waited for months after every detail of the crime was planned. He had dared to insure her only for $25,000. He had wanted to make it $50,000, but it seemed unwise.

He had been compelled to pay a high rate because of her health, too, although the examining doctor had said she might live forty years. He also had to pay the higher rates of an endowment policy to make that amount seem more plausible. Even so, the insurance company undoubtedly would investigate. Well, its agents could probe as much as they pleased. Doubtless he must expect some unpleasant questioning, some delay; but then would come the $25,000, and freedom.

He would move away as soon as the insurance money was paid. He could give out that it was to escape unpleasant memories. That explanation would be accepted. With $25,000 in cash he could go where he chose and live the untrammeled existence that he had longed for all these years.

III

THE train was almost at the Hudson tube. He folded his newspaper, and rapidly ran over his program for the day. Magnuson first. And he'd better eat lunch after all, even if he weren't hungry. The insurance company might ask him to account for every hour of that particular day. It would create suspicion if he admitted he hadn't eaten. A little thing, perhaps, but it was by thinking of the little things, each little thing, that he had constructed this perfect alibi.

The train plunged into the Hudson tube, and its semi-obscurity recalled his thoughts to the gloomy crypt-like cellar where the body of his wife lay stretched on a rude bier of packing boxes, eyes closed, her pale face composed, as he had glimpsed it in that last hasty look under the flickering gleams of the three candles burning slowly but steadily near her head.

He had hardly reached the street when he noticed it was unusually warm for an early March day and he removed his overcoat and flung it over his arm before he had gone a block. He remembered the taxi

driver's prediction a little more than an hour before. Well, George had been right. The thaw had come. Curious how those stupid yokels so often could predict weather changes by some sort of sixth sense.

He suddenly recalled the frozen fire hydrant near his bungalow. Would it thaw in this unexpectedly warm weather? He stopped in consternation. But a moment later he assured himself that the fire would have so much headway when it was discovered that a few minutes delay in getting water would not matter materially. But this sudden change in the weather might have proved disastrous had he depended on the frozen hydrant.

A moment later it occurred to him that his neighbors might be out in their yards or on their porches this first warm day of Spring. Wouldn't they wonder at not seeing his wife? Wouldn't the tightly closed windows of his house cause some comment? In the weather that had been prevailing, raw, windy and icy underfoot, it would seem natural that a semi-invalid remained indoors, but she might at least be expected to come out on the porch on such a day.

Again a momentary panic gripped him before he remembered the nearest neighbor lived nearly one hundred yards away and that he had discouraged friendly relations with this particular family. Nevertheless this unlooked-for rise in the temperature was disquieting. Why the devil hadn't he consulted a weather report before he consummated his long standing plans?

Once more he tried to assure himself that the neighbors would not be likely to notice the closed windows; that there was nothing in the situation really threatening; but this sudden intrusion of the unexpected made him vaguely uneasy. This was the unknown element he had read about in the works of that French criminologist which so often nullified the best laid plans.

He found himself with a growing reluctance to discuss that real estate matter with Magnuson in his present nervous state. After all, it wasn't necessary for his alibi. The man was a shrewd judge of human nature. He might sense something strange in his manner to be recalled afterward. What if that disconcerting stage fright should grip him again?

He had reached Magnuson's office building, but in his agitation he decided to walk around the block while he debated the problem. Once more he argued away his fears. If his wife's non-appearance out of doors and the closed windows were noticed, which was unlikely, it could only create idle gossip at the worst. Nothing could be proved against him; nothing, even if he were openly suspected. He would stick to his prearranged schedule; see Magnuson, buy the orange thread, eat lunch and then go to the library, until train time.

It was warm, though, and getting warmer every minute. It must be a record-breaking day for March. He was perspiring even with his overcoat off and his undercoat unbuttoned. Again he thought of the raging furnace fire in his cellar and the closed windows and again he felt a faint presentiment of disaster stirring in his mind as he strode into the lobby of the building that housed Magnuson's office.

At 1.20 he was still lingering in a restaurant on Forty-eighth Street which he usually patronized. His interview with Magnuson had gone off well enough, but he regretted coming to this café. He knew the waitress at this table and the cashier as well. He had ordered his usual substantial meal; even joked about his appetite with the express purpose of impressing upon them that

his manner had been normal. It was a remote contingency, but it would prove efficacious in case there was an investigation. But when his meal was served he found that it required an actual effort of his will to swallow each reluctant mouthful.

IV

HE already had visited a department store and purchased two spools of orange silk thread to match the sample he carried; he had joked with the sales girl, pretended a distaste for the task, and humorously acted the rôle of a hen-pecked husband. He wanted to fix the incident in her memory and he felt he had succeeded. He had been strongly tempted to flirt with the sly little minx. Her glances indicated she would not have been unwilling. But he had not dared risk that; not yet.

But he hoped she would remember him as vividly as he remembered her. There was a subtle challenge in the very manner she had tossed her ash-blonde bobbed hair before him. Unconsciously he half sighed, then smiled, as he recalled her provocative manner.

The waitress, bringing the check, broke his reverie. His eyes turned to the clock again as she left. It was almost 1.30 and the nerves about his diaphram tightened, his pulses pounded, and he drew an involuntary breath as he watched the minute-hand move toward the half-hour mark with slight but perceptible jerks. He visualized the three candles, mere stubs now, as their burning wicks crept closer and closer to the pile of white flashlight powder in which he had so carefully set them. Any second now, one of the flickering fingers of fire would touch the explosive. He could see the blinding flash; the thick, white smoke rolling upward lighted by a crimson glare from the blazing excelsior; the angry crackle as the flames leaped over the oil-soaked packing boxes and licked hungrily at the thin partitions and flooring joists. The whole basement would be a raging inferno two minutes after the flashlight powder exploded. It didn't matter much how soon the fire was discovered. The house was doomed to destruction and with it would go every trace of incriminating evidence.

His throat was dry, his tongue seemed thick and swollen. Without shifting his fascinated stare from the clock, he lifted a water glass to his lips. It was empty. His fingers fumbled on the table for the carafe and he filled the glass and drained it. The minute hand touched the half-hour with a faint, mechanical click. A second later the clear strokes from the chimes of the Cathedral recalled him to his surroundings. He looked about, nervous, chagrined, to see if his abstraction had been noticed. Apparently not; the restaurant was almost deserted. The waitresses were gossiping together in the rear of the room. But the incident disturbed him. He frowned as he saw where he had spilled water on the table cloth. He filled another glass. How thirsty he was! Was it imagination that he could almost feel the fierce heat from his burning basement? He shook his head angrily. It was only the unusual warmth of the day. But he was getting jumpy; there was no question about that.

For a second the Cathedral chimes had seemed like the tolling of a church bell, a requiem. He tried to smile, but his dry lips seemed immobile. He felt a faint nausea, a touch of giddiness, and a glance in the small paneled wall mirror revealed he was unmistakably pale. This would never do. He must control himself; fix his thoughts on something else; get out in the air and walk off this agitation. He arose,

leaving his customary tip, paid his bill at the cashier's window and set out for the public library.

He was calmer when he arrived at the library. The brisk walk seemed to have restored his confidence. He went to the science department, signed his name, and as usual took out a book on photography. There was no pretence here. This art was his chief interest. He had followed it for years. Incidentally, it gave a plausible explanation for his large purchases of flashlight powder in recent months.

He had decided to come to the library this afternoon, not only because the registration slip would account for the hours spent there if questions were asked, but to relieve any nervousness by immersing his mind in his favorite pursuit.

HE settled back in his usual corner of the science reading-room. It was uncomfortably warm, even with the windows open. He unbuttoned his vest. He could not recall such an unusual March day. It felt more like May or even June. He found it impossible to concentrate upon his book, or even to pretend to, his eyes straying out the window toward the ceaseless stream of traffic on Fifth Avenue.

But some quality of the day itself made study impossible just as it always had each spring of his childhood. Or was it the vague apprehension that was still lodged in his mind? He frowned again, but his thoughts were still harking back through the years, recalling sentimental associations of long ago.

Nervously he glanced at his watch. The house must be almost destroyed by this time. He wondered if the roof had fallen in yet. Again he pictured the scene: the shouting, ineffective, amateur firemen, the curious crowd, the groups of chattering women. He supposed he would have to make a present to the fire department. It was the custom. Would fifty dollars be enough? He planned leaving Riverside soon; perhaps he could avoid giving anything. Still, it might be better to do the usual thing and escape any criticism. Village tongues would wag if given the slightest excuse. Well, the worst they could charge him with was carelessness in piling that rubbish so near the furnace. Once more he recalled every step he had taken and assured himself he had nothing to fear.

But he could not deceive himself; he was uneasy. Some formless fear, some hazy premonition seemed to lurk somewhere in his mind. It was too elusive to analyze, but too persistent to ignore. He could not reason it away. Probably it was only nerves. Most men couldn't casually choke their wives after breakfast without feeling a trifle upset.

AFTER breakfast — that was another of the little things he had not overlooked. It wouldn't do to have her dead too long before the fire. Chemists, criminologists, could sometimes tell how long a person had been dead even if the body had been charred by fire.

He looked at his watch once more. It was only 3:10. What was the use of his waiting here until the four o'clock train? He couldn't seem to concentrate on his book. Why not catch the 3:30 and arrive in Riverside at 4:42? The body would be found long before he got there. Fewer commuters would be on the earlier train. He would not be likely to meet any casual acquaintances and could compose himself, summon his energies for the ordeal that awaited him at the Riverside station. He

might as well get it over with; waiting made him unbearably nervous.

As the train entered the Hudson tube the humid, fetid atmosphere, the dripping arched walls, the dim, infrequent lights, gave him the gruesome impression of being in a catacombs, or charnel house. It was vaguely reminiscent of some tale of horror he had read in childhood. Once more he thought of his last glance of what lay in his basement. He was perspiring. He impatiently unfolded his afternoon paper.

ACCIDENT EXPOSES WIFE MURDERER

This was the first headline he saw. It seemed to draw his eye like a magnet. He caught his breath; his heart seemed to skip a beat. He bent close to the printed sheet, anxiously searching for the man's name. No, it was not his. How ridiculous to have felt a second's fear, but a wave of relief flooded over him. He grinned nervously. That headline had given him a start. He began to read the details.

He snorted with disgust. "Murder will out," the arresting detective was quoted as saying as he explained the accidental circumstance which first directed suspicion toward the husband. What utter nonsense! Why did people always repeat these silly aphorisms?

Persons were murdered every day in all parts of the world, and often the crimes were not discovered. Still oftener no one was convicted. Of course, most murderers, he grimaced slightly at the words, were fools, persons of low mentality, of little imagination. It required a certain amount of intellect to plan a successful crime. But it could be done. Often it was done; and he had done it. What rot to maintain that murderers invariably were detected!

The train was crossing the Jersey tide flats. After the stale mustiness of the tunnel, the tang of the fresh salt air felt like a tonic. Naysmith drank in several deep breaths, tossed aside his paper and turned to the window.

Despite the sun and the cloudless vault of blue sky there was something indescribably desolate about the wide waste of swamp land. The dead marsh grass and the lank, drooping reeds which fringed the leprous, salt-encrusted mud along the narrow inlets where oily, slate-gray water sluggishly swirled; the logs and gnarled tree roots, cast up by the tide, like lazy saurian monsters, half embedded in the slime of stagnant pools; and a solitary seagull, aimlessly circling over the morass seemed to evoke a shadowy troop of melancholy memories, profoundly and inexplicably depressing as the phantoms of a nightmare. He was relieved when the stark dreariness of the sea meadows was left behind and the train commenced its slow, gradual climb through the wooded uplands.

V

HE noticed the Passaic River was swollen beyond its banks by a turbulent flood of yellow, muddied water flaked with floating ice; the culverts beside the tracks were filled with melting snow; and each little creek and rivulet leading down from the hills had been transformed since morning into a miniature mountain torrent. The melted snow made ponds on the surface of the fields and the clay banks of the railroad cuts oozed moisture as the frozen sub-soil responded to the beneficent caress of the sun.

His eyes swept the passing countryside, but his thoughts were still picturing the passage of the tragedy at his home. His reason assured him

he had nothing to fear, yet his uneasiness persisted. The distant glimpses of the river, the noisy burling of the roadside rivulets, the sparkling ponds that covered the fields, seemed to hint of some vague danger.

He could not shake off this impalpable premonition. Once more he was conscious of the same sensation he had felt at the telephone that morning; as if some alert sub-conscious faculty were trying to telegraph a message of warning to his unresponsive brain. What could he have overlooked? But he could not rid himself of that haunting disquietude. It defied analysis. It was maddening; like trying to recall a familiar name that perversely eludes the memory.

He gave up at last with a distracted sigh. That intuitive flash would come of its own accord finally; certainly there was nothing gained by attempting to force it. He knew from experience that was futile. Probably it was sheer nervousness. Riverside was the next stop. He was surprised to find how much time he had wasted trying to puzzle out the formless fear that still oppressed him. He must compose himself for the announcement that awaited him at the station.

He scrutinized himself in the narrow mirror between the windows. He was certainly pale and he fancied he could discern a harried, anxious expression in his eyes. Well, the men who notified him also would be agitated. They wouldn't notice his appearance. And after they had broken the news his pallor would seem natural. It was going to be difficult, especially at first, but he could carry it through.

He heard the engine whistle and the train already was slowing down. Steeling his nerves, and assuming his habitual air of reserve, he edged into the aisle and stepped from the train.

VI

STIFFLY, almost automatically, Naysmith walked along the station platform, looking neither to the left nor right. His vision was blurred and the little group of dispersing commuters seemed like figures in a dream. Every second he expected to be accosted by a group of neighbors delegated to inform him of the tragedy.

Instinctively, unconsciously, he was stooped slightly, like a man who faces a storm. He had alighted from a rear coach and as he came up the platform, keeping close to the train, the shadowy shapes before him seemed to fade into the nearest exits. He was unmistakably giddy, and the black spots dancing before his eyes were not figments of his fancy. As he approached the taxi-stand he ventured his first searching, wavering glance.

Transfixed by astonishment, he halted abruptly and looked again. There was no group waiting to notify him. He must have been walking more slowly than he supposed, for the platform was deserted except for the station agent and trainmen. A single taxicab was at the stand. George, the youth who had driven him to the train that morning, was standing beside its open door.

A sudden consternation gripped him. Why wasn't someone there to notify him? What did it portend? Surely no one would delegate that mission to George. George was looking at him curiously, open-mouthed, with obvious surprise. He noticed, too, the station agent was staring intently. They must know about the fire or they would not look so strangely. But why hadn't they sent some neighbors to break the news?

He stood irresolute, utterly disconcerted, for one panicky instant, half inclined to jump aboard the train that was just pulling past, and then the relieving solution flashed to his mind. George had heard him say he would return at 5:10. They expected him on the later train. That explained why no one came to meet him.

At the same instant he realized how alarmingly suspicious his attitude must appear. Partially recovering his self-possession, trying to compose his face to mask his emotions, he silently cursed his momentary agitation as he advanced toward the waiting taxicab.

"Hello!" said George. "I didn't expect to see *you* back."

SOME peculiar emphasis of the chauffeur's words, some hint of menace in his manner, revived Naysmith's fears. Silently he stepped into the cab. As silently George slammed the door, mounted the driver's seat, and the car lurched forward as he threw in the clutch.

What had George meant? He must know about the fire. His first fascinated stare indicated as much. But there was something brusque and alarming in his attitude. Why hadn't the damned moron mentioned the fire? Was it a sort of rude delicacy that kept him silent? Desire to avoid an unpleasant duty? It must be that, yet his tones were hardly sympathetic. And why had the station agent looked at him so fixedly? There seemed more hostility than commiseration in his glance.

As the taxicab whirled into the Main Street of the village and past the open doors of the Fire Hall, Naysmith saw the engine and hose car in their accustomed places. His jaws dropped in dismay. Why had the fire apparatus returned so soon? Or had it been out of the Hall? Where was the hose that usually was strung out to dry after a fire. His house hadn't burned. That explained why George had said nothing. But that curious stare! The station agent, too. What, in God's name, did it mean? They must know something. The suspense was maddening. He had an insane impulse to pound on the window; to stop the car; to demand that George explain. His hand was half uplifted before he realized that such a request meant certain betrayal. No, he must wait; wait and feign indifference.

His brain was reeling and he felt faint, almost nauseated. He must have air. He fumbled at the straps to raise the window, but it was beyond his strength. He weakly slumped back in the seat as the car bounded and swerved over the slippery ruts at reckless speed. Why the devil was George driving so fast? That must mean something, too.

Sick with apprehension, he closed his eyes, gritted his teeth, and resolutely rallied every faculty in a desperate effort to regain his self-possession. What had happened? Could his candles have failed? What! Was that the meaning of the intuitive warning which had battered at the portals of his consciousness all afternoon?

The sweat stood on his brow and he clenched his hands as he fought for calmness. Well, what if his candles had failed to ignite the house? That didn't mean detection. The body hadn't been discovered. No one need know. He could fire the house tomorrow. No; he could never stand another such day! Damn the risk! He would do it that very night!

But what did George's strange stare signify? Could it be that—— Nonsense! It was nothing; merely

the product of his own sick imagination. He was perfectly safe even if by some inexplicable chance his candles had failed to set the house afire. But he must compose himself; adjust his plans to this unexpected circumstance. He opened his eyes. The hill cut off the view, but he could glimpse the house as the car turned into the lane leading to the river. He only had a few moments. He must think swiftly.

Ah, he had it! He would ask George to wait while he went into the house and pretended to ask if his wife wanted him to attend to any errands in the village. He would ride back with George and make a few purchases to carry out the deception. He had fooled George that morning. He could do it again. That would re-establish his alibi. But the house would burn that night. He grimly decided that.

The car shot past a clump of trees and its speed slackened as it neared the river lane. Every nerve tense, his heart pounding violently, Naysmith strained to catch the first sight of his house. There it was! It hadn't burned. He could just see the roof over the trees. As the car straightened into the narrow lane the bulky form of the driver shut off his view.

VII

NAYSMITH leaned forward again to raise the window to thrust out his head, but the sight of George's face in the mirror in the front of the car deterred him. He must wait. He didn't dare display such obvious anxiety. His heart sank at the thought that George had been watching him; that his face might have betrayed his agitation. Again he fought to compose himself. They would be at his porch in less than a minute. He was so weak, so utterly unstrung that he dreaded the ordeal of walking from the car to his front door.

The car skidded on a patch of mud and as it swung sideways for a second he could see his front yard.

Great God! It was black with people. Half the village must be there. And there had been no fire. What had happened? For a moment he was stunned with terror; then a swift instinct warned him to flee.

"Stop! Stop!" he shouted, frantically pounding on the front window. George did not turn his head, but Naysmith saw his malevolent grin reflected in the mirror as the car sped down the lane and whirled into the graveled driveway. It lurched to a stop with a sudden grinding of brakes, and George, leaping from his seat, flung open the door, and, pointing to the cringing Naysmith, dramatically cried:

"Here he is!"

Hardly comprehending, Naysmith dully watched the excited villagers charging toward him and crowding around the car. Then he saw the chief of police, lank and saturnine, violently shoving his way toward him, accompanied by a stocky, red-faced man with a sheriff's star on his breast. Naysmith tried to rise, but his legs seemed limp, powerless.

"I arrest you, Frank Naysmith," the Chief of Police loudly intoned, "for the murder of your wife."

"Murder — my wife!" Naysmith managed to gasp. He was too dazed to speak as the fat sheriff suddenly snapped handcuffs about his wrists.

"Jump in the car. We'll take him down to the jail," the Sheriff crisply directed the village policeman. Jammed between the two officers on the narrow seat, Naysmith still sat in stunned silence as the driver forced the auto through the crowd with warning honks and circled into the lane on his way back to the village.

"You figured out a smooth scheme, Naysmith," the Sheriff began in low even tones with a sidelong glance of distaste not unmingled with a certain reluctant admiration. "That trick with George, making him believe you was talking with your wife was pretty slick. It worked, too. Only you overlooked this sudden thaw—and the river."

"The river! What do you mean?" mumbled Naysmith.

"It flooded your cellar three feet deep," the Sheriff continued. "If you had lived here longer you would have known the river overflows its banks every spring. It was unusually early this year.

"When the butcher called at your house about half-past three this afternoon he couldn't raise an answer at the back-door and when he went around to ring the front bell he saw the water pouring into your cellar through the coal-chute. It looked queer to him, your wife not answering. Finally he notified the neighbors.

"They were afraid your wife had fainted. They knew she was sort of sickly. So they called up the Chief here and he broke in through the back-door. I guess you know what he found?" he added with another sidelong glance.

Naysmith maintained a stubborn silence.

"Oh, there's no use of your denying it," the Sheriff continued. "We found the three candles in the cellar burned down within an inch of a pile of oil-soaked rubbish. There are finger-prints on the candles. I guess we'll find they're yours; and more finger-prints where you disconnected the phone. There're some on your wife's throat, too," he concluded with grim complacence. "Oh, we've got you dead to rights, but you'd have had a perfect alibi if you hadn't overlooked the river."

Naysmith slumped lower in the seat, his head bowed on his breast. He did not answer.

"But at last he realized the import of that vague warning that some subconscious sense had been vainly endeavoring to communicate to his intelligence all afternoon.

He *had* known about the river.

He remembered, now. The former tenant had told him the cellar was flooded every spring.

Distinctive and Different

A SLIGHT MISAPPREHENSION
By Dale Collins

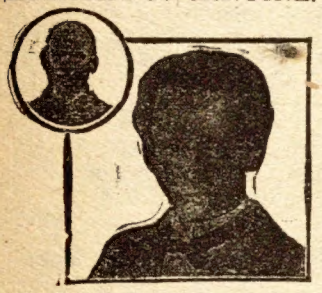
À BON MARCHÉ
By William Merriam Rouse

WHO?
By Richard Howells Watkins

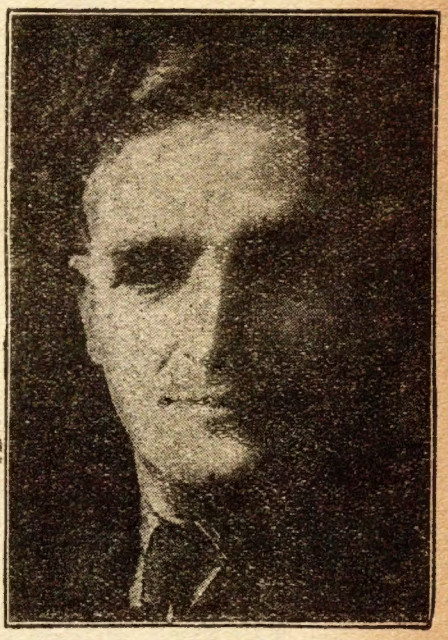
In Our April 1 Issue

NEW HAIR GROWTH

Now is your chance to get Kotalko and see what it will do for YOUR HAIR. Use Kotalko if you are bald, if you have dandruff, if you are losing your hair. Legions of users report that Kotalko has succeeded when all else had failed. **Good hair is priceless.** Kotalko is different. KOTALKO IS GENUINE.



Jack Evans, widely known athlete, was almost entirely bald as shown in photo. Had been losing his hair a long time, he writes, but it started growing anew when he began with Kotalko. By using Kotalko a short time he obtained a full growth just as you see in the large photo.



From Photo of M. C. MacDowell

ARE YOU LOSING HAIR, OR BALD?

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From Photo of Frances Lonsdale

Gentlemen:—When my daughter began to use Kotalko she was nearly bald.

Although she had tried many things, her hair would not grow. We thought the roots were dead.

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(Signed) F. LONSDALE

Dear Friends:

Before I started using Kotalko my hair was falling out something awful. The scalp was always hurting and the dandruff came out every time I combed my hair.

These troubles are gone since I used Kotalko and my hair has grown in again. I certainly have recommended Kotalko highly to others.

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Matthew Caldenwood MacDowell

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